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The Time of the Thriller:
Suspense and Continuity after World War II

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in English

by

Martin Zirulnik

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Time of the Thriller:
Suspense and Continuity after World War II

by

Martin Zirulnik

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Ursula K. Heise, Chair

Through the analysis of a selection of thrillers written and produced in the years immediately following World War II, this dissertation defines the threshold conditions of narrative suspense in the twentieth century—the pending disappearance of continuity, not just in techniques of storytelling but in longstanding assumptions about time, about how it is and how it ought to be organized. These works, for instance, seem in various ways to prefigure a more general attenuation of narrative retrospection—narrative retrospection as a grammatical convention of realist fiction but also as a form of belief, as fidelity to the qualitative density of human experience as it is transmitted through time. This period of aesthetic transition, marked by the iconoclasm of the avant-garde, is often seen as a terminal point in the history of storytelling after modernism, a time (though certainly not the only time) when the novel dies along with the systems of value that upheld it. Alternately, as more recent scholarship has shown, it can be seen as the moment when the present tense starts to gain traction as the dominant mode of fictionalizing time. But the works examined in the following pages—including the fiction of

Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and Raymond Chandler, as well as the postwar films of Carol Reed, among others—modify the constraints of genre and reshape the forms of suspense simply by extending the transmission, by perpetuating the same old message about time even when it becomes grotesque in its apparent asynchrony. The death of narrative is perpetually delayed; or, one might say, narrative is undead, and it remains so as it drags itself onward into the cold war era.

The dissertation of Martin Zirulnik is approved.

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2019

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As I think Emerson once put it, no matter how many zig zags one takes, the path will always look like a straight line when seen from a sufficient distance—so long as one acts alone at each turn. That could be true for scholarship as well as life, but there is at least enough distance now for me to thank both Mitchell Breitwieser, who helped set the line in the right direction, and D.A. Miller, without whom I couldn’t have looked close enough along the way.

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Introduction: The Undeath of Narrative Suspense

The thrillers studied in this dissertation all seem, at least from the outset, unlikely to thrill: they cannot depend on a play of expectation or otherwise draw surprise and excitement out of the unknown because they project no future to speak of. Instead, though situated historically around the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, they convey with a certain formal intensity the impression that time had become distorted beyond recall and that it might not go on and on as it always had. As the narrator of Elizabeth Bowen's wartime thriller *The Heat of the Day* (1948) puts it, this was the "'time being' which war [had] made the very being of time," as if what was once figured as an inner sense of duration, of time passing, were now just a rhetorical reflex—a special effect rather than a special feature of consciousness (109).¹ Under these conditions, the conventional forms of narrative suspense are held in relief but are also to a large extent emptied of affective and psychological content, and they operate in a manner that poses significant conceptual challenges to the phenomenological presumptions that dominated both philosophical and common-sense understandings of time in the period. This confrontation comes most sharply into focus in the years immediately following World War II and thus tends in retrospect to be obscured by the cultural upheavals and discontinuities more generally associated with postmodernism. But it indicates an important period of artistic and philosophical readjustment—an existential shift in the groundwork of narrative fiction that works not by nihilistic disruption or radical innovation, but by holding in abeyance the premise of aesthetic continuity on which its forms of sympathetic engagement had for so long been founded.

¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (New York: Anchor, 2002).

As an initiatory example, consider the opening scene of *The Heat of the Day*. The novel was published in 1948, but it begins on the first Sunday of September, 1942, in a London still at war and still shaken by memories of the Blitz:

The Sunday had been brilliant, without a stain of cloud. Now, the burning turquoise sky of the afternoon began to gain in transparency as it lost colour: from above the trees round the theatre there stole away not only colour but time. Music—the waltzes, the marches, the gay overtures—now began to command this hour-less place. The people lost their look of uncertainty. The heroic marches made them lift up their heads; recollections of opera moulded their faces into unconscious smiles, and during the waltzes women's eyes glittered with delicious tears about nothing. First note by note, drop by drop, then steadily, the music entered senses, nerves and fancies that had been parched. What first was a mirage strengthened into a universe, for the shabby Londoners and the exiled foreigners sitting in this worn glade in the middle of Regent's Park. (4)

Suspense takes form in this scene (for it does turn out to be a scene of suspense in a novel of espionage) not through the introduction of a “stain”—of an “uncertainty” that disrupts the natural order—but rather through the privation of time and the coordinated advance of an imperious “now” that synchronizes the senses of natives and exiles alike, forming an affective “universe” emptied of content. It is a fiction “about nothing,” a “mirage”; but in the vacuum left behind where the hours should be, memory (in this case, music recollected) is drawn out “drop by drop” into the environment where, in the form of a collective habit, it continues to keep bodies in motion: lifting heads, contorting faces, extracting tears.

Bowen is by no means considered an avant-garde writer, but the universal condition of suspendedness that this novel stages has little to do with the modes of anticipation and sympathetic identification found in conventional narrative fiction. Instead, it confronts readers with a conception of time and of temporality in which the classical scheme of past, present and future, along with the familiar metaphors of inner and outer time, are so warped—so overwhelmed by the gravity of the present and the scenic dispersal of memory—that any sort of narrative form would seem untenable. But somehow things do keep going. Even as time steals away, the aesthetic effect falls short (just short, maybe) of the sublime inhumanity that Jean-François Lyotard will ascribe nearly four decades later to the still ongoing “threat of nothing further happening,” of the imminent “disappearance of the temporal continuum through which the experience of generations used to be transmitted” (99, 105).²

The novels, stories and films that are the objects of study in the following chapters indicate the threshold conditions of narrative suspense in the 20th century, the pending disappearance of continuity, not just in techniques of storytelling but in longstanding assumptions about time, about how it is and how it ought to be organized. These works, for instance, seem in various ways to prefigure a more general attenuation of narrative retrospection—narrative retrospection as a grammatical convention of realist fiction but also as a form of belief, as fidelity to the qualitative density of human experience as it is “transmitted” through time. This period of aesthetic transition, marked by the iconoclasm of the avant-garde, is often seen as a terminal point in the history of storytelling after modernism, a time (though certainly not the only time) when the novel dies along with the systems of value that upheld it.

² See “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991). In this work, Lyotard is more directly concerned with time than he is in his better-known discussion of the Kantian sublime in the appendix to “The Postmodern Condition.”

Alternately, as Armen Avanessian and Anke Hennig have compellingly argued, it can be seen as a moment when the present tense starts to gain traction as the dominant mode of fictionalizing time.³ But the works examined in the following pages—including the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, Graham Greene and Raymond Chandler, as well as the postwar films of Carol Reed, among others—modify the constraints of genre and reshape the forms of suspense simply by extending the transmission, by perpetuating the same old message about time even when it becomes grotesque in its apparent asynchrony. The death of narrative is perpetually delayed; or, one might say, narrative is undead, and it remains so as it drags itself onward into what Mark Seltzer has recently described as “the unreal reality of the perpetual postwar condition” that extends “from World War II to World War Z” (25).⁴

Why should it be the province of thrillers to sustain this movement? This dissertation is not in a conventional sense a genre study, but one of its underlying claims is that thrillers tend to intensify the formal strategies that make special effects out of time, and so they must conceptualize time in a special way. These works depend, that is, on *de facto* philosophies of time that must be, for the sake of plausibility, solidly based in common-sense ideas about how time and causality are supposed to work—but that at the same time challenge and manipulate these conceptions in novel and peculiar ways in order to produce disturbing effects. David Wittenberg has made the case that time travel fiction is a privileged form in a similar sense, that it can be understood as a “laboratory” for conducting experiments with time. This is a useful idea and might aptly be transferred to some of the thrillers examined here, but Wittenberg’s concept of a “popular philosophy of narrative” seems to entail a somewhat strained compromise between

³ See *Present Tense: A Poetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), which will be discussed at greater length in chapter 1.

⁴ Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

the analysis of genre as part of the domain of cultural studies and the analysis of narrative form in terms of the philosophy of time.⁵ Mark Currie avoids this apparent bind by arguing that it is important to think of *all* narrative fiction as being in some sense “about time”—even, or maybe especially, when it does not thematize time or (as in time travel fiction) make it the major stake of its plot developments. Whether or not a work of fiction explicitly theorizes time through the commentary of a narrator, it has access, as Currie puts it, to the “temporal resources” of narrative fiction in addition to the argumentative logic of philosophical discourse. Thus, regardless of genre, narrative fiction has a kind of purchase on time that philosophy does not (89).⁶

Yet, even for Currie, the particular way in which thrillers are “about time” does wind up hinging on a specific generic distinction—that is, their distinction from whodunnit type mysteries. Following Tzvetan Todorov’s influential typology of detective fiction, Currie maintains that the whodunnit “is characterised by curiosity, since it proceeds from effect to cause” (i.e. from the examination of evidence to the description of the crime that produced it), whereas the thriller “is characterised by suspense and proceeds from cause to effect” (i.e. from the setting of a time-bomb to its detonation); or, as he rephrases it: “the whodunnit works backwards from a known outcome while the thriller proceeds forwards into an unknown future” (87). Currie doesn’t pursue the implications of this generic chiasmus very far, but perhaps there is no better proof of the correctness of the description than the precision and intensity with which the writers and filmmakers studied in the following chapters try to *refute it* in their various efforts to modify the basic constraints of genre—efforts which begin, but can never quite end, by questioning the premise that time moves forward, or that it moves at all.

⁵ David Wittenberg, *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

⁶ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

For Todorov, the distinction between the whodunnit and the thriller is typological, but it is also historical. The thriller, as defined by its concern with future events, is *itself* the future of the whodunnit, as defined by its concern with past events, and the thriller comes into dominance on both sides of the Atlantic just about exactly in the middle of the twentieth century (47).⁷ Some terminological clarification is necessary here, however. The English word *thriller* has been in use at least since the late nineteenth century to describe a certain type of detective story (and also as a term of disparagement for sensational art of all kinds). In this case, the term is Richard Howard's translation of the French *série noire*, which was originally the name of a Parisian publishing imprint started during World War II, but which had come by the time of Todorov's typology (1966) to be associated with both a literary genre in Europe and a film genre in America (*film noir*). What is lost in translation, then, is the specific sense of historicity implied by the distinction and also the way in which, in making it, Todorov attaches this sense of historicity to novelistic modes of affective involvement (a work's capacity, say, to "thrill" or to shock or to surprise). What he describes, in other words, is a historical shift that is coeval with a general shift of *interest* founded in the temporal conceits of narrative fiction: in the period "just before and particularly after World War II," "curiosity" transforms into "suspense." This is the effect of a creative process of purification in which mystery is rendered away and, concomitantly, "prospection takes the place of retrospection" in the logic of the form (47).

This canonic account of the types of detective story has been influential particularly for its narratological description of the temporal situation of the whodunnit, but it has been much less so for its description of the emergence of this new type of thing called the thriller or the *série*

⁷ Tzvetan Todorov. "The Typology of Detective Fiction," *The Poetics of Prose*, translated by Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

noire. I would suggest that one reason for this is that the thriller emerges out of Todorov's account not as a distinct genre but rather as a form of time, one that is modeled in terms of the grammar of fiction. This becomes especially clear as he describes the transition between the whodunnit and the thriller, a subtype which he classifies as the "suspense novel" (51). The suspense novel is distinct (one might guess) for its increasing emphasis on the present, and thus the history of the thriller is translated into a complete rhetorical form of time: the past form is defined by its pastness, the future form is defined by its futureness, and both the continuities and discontinuities between these two forms are explained in terms of a form of presentness that is suspended between them.

But this turns out to be a problematic present (as the present usually is). At issue here is not only the historicity of narrative forms—or the metanarrative quality of historical narratives of the sort that Todorov offers—but also, in a more basic sense, the way in which the grammar of fiction works to model time. To exemplify the genre of the present (out of which the future of the thriller is to evolve) Todorov cites Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, the two most prominent figures associated with the hardboiled style of American detective fiction of the 1930s and 1940s (48). The present is characterized in these stories as a time of vulnerability: the mysteries of the past still linger—and the past tense still dominates the prose—but now the detective's own life is increasingly at risk as more immediate scenes of violence and murder expand and overshadow narrative developments. However, the grouping of these two authors is somewhat perplexing in the context of Todorov's broader claim about the thriller's abandonment of retrospection to a more precarious present. While Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe certainly meets his share of physical harm, Chandler's novels are narrated in the first person in a past tense that would seem to guarantee the detective's mortal safety. A certain sense of

vulnerability might be attributable to what I discuss below (and at greater length in Chapter 3) as the uniquely unretrospective quality of Marlowe's past tense; but the distinction makes more immediate sense for Hammett, who, in developing the famous detective Sam Spade from his anonymous prototype (known as the "Continental Op") switched from first person to third person and therefore removed the assurance that the detective (or anyone) lives to tell the tale.

The purpose of this extended discussion of Todorov's typology is not to rehearse the pitfalls of French structuralism, but rather to start to bring into focus some of the ways in which the fictional forms of suspense, particularly in the period immediately after World War II, take part in a more general reconceptualization of time in the twentieth century—especially around the problems of continuity and the apparent expansion of the domain of present. Todorov himself concedes that the formal developments of the suspense novel pose a challenge to his own temporal scheme: *as a model of time, one that stands for the present, the suspense novel cannot be explained in terms of succession through time because, though it is supposed to mark a point of transition, it also coexists with the thriller. In other words, the rhetorical distinction of the present collapses into asynchrony in its formulation as a mode of suspense. One reason that it is hard for Todorov to place the thriller within time is that the time of the thriller—its strained continuities, its perilous and precarious presents—seems to have formed part of the concept of time and of temporality that he seeks to apply to it. Thus, two years later, Gilles Deleuze is not just making an analogy when he insists in his preface to *Difference and Repetition* (1968) that "a book of philosophy should be...a very particular species of detective novel."* Instead, he's describing the "cruel" and violent process through which empirical notions of time are formed

more generally: the “zones of presence” dramatized in *romans noirs* take their part in “the most insane creation of concepts ever seen or heard” (xx).⁸

In using the somewhat more capacious term *thriller* to group the works in this dissertation, I mean to draw attention away from problems of generic description and towards the aesthetic, ethical and philosophical implications of literary and cinematic works that sought, after the war, to isolate the present and to disjoin suspense from the temporal continuum presumed to be necessary to it. This doesn’t reject Todorov’s enduring typology so much as it amplifies the implication in it that, whatever the thriller is and whenever it appears, it is better understood as a form of time than as a set of generic criteria. Or to put an even finer point on it: if the cold war era can be described as the time of the thriller—and not just a time of perpetual suspense—this is because such a claim is more a tautology than a metaphor.

Of all the texts examined in the following pages, the efforts to isolate the present are perhaps most palpable in the postwar work of Elizabeth Bowen. In order to arrive at a clearer sense of how narrative suspense in this period is, as it were, suspended and reformulated in relation to shifting conceptions of time, Chapter 1 of this study is largely focused on her major novel of the period, *The Heat of the Day* (though this will be placed in the context of her other fiction and nonfiction writing). This novel, based to some extent on Bowen’s own firsthand experience of war, is quite explicit in its theorization of time, which is manifest everywhere in the book—from the aphoristic commentary of the narrator, to the unusual symmetries in the organization of the chapters, to the way that the characters act and speak, and even down to the way that the sentences are structured and punctuated. The existential crisis that motivates all this is the menace of what Bowen elsewhere calls “the immense To-day,” a pervasive fear—still

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

quite alive today—that everything is collapsing into an all-encompassing *now* (437).⁹ Against this movement—or rather counter-movement—the novel stages what can be described as a rhetorical analysis of the present, which for Bowen is as much a problem of language as it is an existential and historical one. For its effect, this formal strategy must suspend narrative indefinitely, but this turns out to be a monumental undertaking for a novel about spies, blackmail, love affairs, bombings and all the other sorts of things that, in thrillers, tend to entail *happening*.

The principal way that the novel manages this is in its unusual mode of characterization: rather than *motivating* her characters, Bowen attaches to each of them a specific rhetorical form of time, and then, very much on the model of a laboratory experiment, steps back and observes how these figures interact. As the narrator clinically puts it: “The relation of people to one another is subject to the relation of each to time, to what is happening” (212). Bowen’s underlying research question might be formulated as follows: once the present cancels or subsumes everything that has happened, happens, and will happen, *what endures*? And in what sense can this, whatever it is, be the subject of literature insofar as literature is a mode of relation that is in turn subject to its relation to time? The choice of genre proves as revealing as it is self-defeating. This line of inquiry educes from the conventional logic of the thriller a form of aesthetic recursion that (in retrospect) seems much more readily assimilable to the logic of postmodernism than to its own literary-historical moment. And, as the chapter ultimately argues, it is a question to which the novel cannot quite articulate an answer within the formal terms that it so urgently sets for itself. Instead, it defers to an evacuated realism, a “nonhuman...hub of imaginary life” in which the old novelistic forms of social relation and self-formation are

⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen’s Court and Seven Winters* (London: Vintage, 1999).

transmitted from the past into the future, but which, unbound from the present, appear only as a “thoughtless extension” of the scenery, devoid of human interest (52, 372).

An equivalent “hub” situates the iconic final shot of Graham Greene and Carol Reed’s *The Third Man* (1949), which extends radially and without end from Vienna’s Central Cemetery, repudiating the love interest that never quite finds its way to the film’s center. But, as I will argue in Chapter 2, Greene (in his own writing and also in his collaborations with Reed) arrives at the same point from almost precisely the opposite direction. In a trivial sense, *The Third Man* stages a scenario in which it seems that, just as in *The Heat of the Day*, things won’t happen: we learn in the opening scene that the main character has just died, which leaves no *reason* for the plot to go forward even though it does anyway. But how this scenario plays out in the film, and in Greene’s work more generally, reverses the stakes: while Bowen maintains a certain strained fidelity to principles of aesthetic continuity, Greene finds continuity to be, as he puts it, “the enemy of life” (66).¹⁰

From our side of the developments of poststructuralism in literary theory over the following decades, this might seem like a fairly banal complaint about the incommensurability of narrative fiction and reality—highlighting in advance of Roland Barthes, for instance, the way in which narrative systematically confuses temporal sequence and causal consequence. But for Greene, this antipathy derives not from a suspicion or skepticism towards narrative so much as a deep philosophical and theological unease with the prevalent belief in the first half of the 20th century that, as William James formulated it, the system of “relations that connect experiences” is as empirically real as any discrete object of sense experience.¹¹ Such a system, by radicalizing the empiricism of David Hume, in effect opened consciousness out into a world of “pure”

¹⁰ Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: Vintage, 1999).

¹¹ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

unbounded continuity, which Greene took to be as eternally bleak and confounding as disciples of thinkers like James and Henri Bergson took to be a promise of existential freedom.

Against this indefinite protophenomenological background to human intuition and temporal experience, Greene suggests that, in film at least, mistakes of aesthetic continuity—slight visual lapses or narrative inconsistencies that disrupt the illusion of temporal seamlessness—can become a form of “unconscious poetry” (66). Chapter 2 seeks first to discover and to describe the elusive poetry of the continuity error, and then to follow out its aesthetic and ethical implication in both cinematic and literary terms. The primary focus is on the two Greene and Reed thrillers of the postwar period—*The Fallen Idol* (1947) and *The Third Man*—but the analyses of the films are contextualized in relation to Greene’s novels, to Reed’s other postwar productions, to the short story on which *The Fallen Idol* was based, and to some of Greene’s own non-fiction writing about film and literary style.

The chapter will show that, though the minute art of the continuity error has little in common with the more drastic experiments of high modernism or the avant-garde, it signals an important front on which the conventions of narrative suspense are provisionally discontinued as the “temporal resources” of storytelling adapt to the dominant figurations of time at midcentury. Any art of error, however, presents an intractable paradox: once an error is admitted as part of a work of art—once it appears deliberate, or even just accidentally meaningful—it would in effect be purified and drawn into the system of relations that it was supposed to contravene. And just as *The Third Man* fails properly to end as Alida Valli walks indifferently through the cemetery, right on past the edge of the frame, so too does the art of the continuity error fail properly to fail, which suggests that everything is still dragged together and onward in a grim metonymy that not even death can terminate.

Chapter 3 follows these aesthetic quandaries across the Atlantic in the postwar work of Raymond Chandler. Once again, there is a trivial sense in which the presumption of narrative continuity is suspended: Chandler's famous hardboiled detective, Philp Marlowe, is a serial character who appears time and again for decades but doesn't apparently age—even though the world in which he operates, one of the great literary depictions of the city of Los Angeles in the twentieth century, is itself very much caught up in the social and historical upheavals of the era. Chandler, as the chapter will show, was well aware of this temporal incongruity, which (especially in the years after World War II) conditions the sense of suspense in novels that otherwise seem suspenseless. Unlike either conventional whodunnits or conventional thrillers, the Marlowe novels attempt to formulate a perpetual present—a narrational method that moves neither backward from known outcomes to mysterious events (e.g. there are scarcely clues to be found) nor forward to an unknown future (e.g. the same scenes recur over and over again).

The aesthetic strategy runs deeper than the novels' generic seriality or the agelessness of the protagonist: there is a programmatic effort in Chandler to disinvest narration of the quality of retrospection typical of literary language—but to do so in the past tense. This is evident, for instance, in Chandler's subtle but persistent refusal to present Marlowe as a writer or storyteller, even as his past tense stories are told in the first person and have a self-conscious poetic quality that stands out from other mystery writing of the period. As suggested above, such formal adjustments to the resources that narrative fiction had at hand in conceptualizing time are intensified in the postwar years, so while this chapter offers a general account of the arc of the Marlowe novels from beginning to end, its analysis is focused on the later works, especially what Chandler wrote during and immediately after the war. This includes *The Lady in the Lake* (1943), *The Little Sister* (1949), and *The Long Goodbye* (1954), as well as a discussion of Robert

Montgomery's film adaptation of *The Lady in the Lake* (1947)—which, as a Hollywood thriller based on a highly unusual experiment in cinematic point of view, helps to highlight the temporal aporias around which suspense is constructed in the novels. The chapter concludes with discussions of the last Marlowe story, “The Pencil” (1959), and the last Marlowe novel, *Playback* (1957). The former was published in England and has since been largely ignored, and the latter is typically written off by scholars and genre-fans alike as an unmitigated failure, but—as the titles, observed side by side, might already begin suggest—these final statements offer a reflexive analysis of the forms of time in Chandler's fiction, a kind of retrospective admission that the prospect of an unretrospective past had been hopelessly recursive.

As was Chapter 2, this Chapter is thus also to a large extent a study of error, of failure understood as an aesthetic principle. One gets the sense while reading Chandler that, as in Bowen, the prose just barely holds itself from collapsing into the present tense as Marlowe goes about solving mysteries that keep unfolding in real time; but, in fact, the faults seem more often to transpire outside of the present as the novels conceive it. The chapter will show that where there are continuity errors in Chandler, these produce the opposite effect from what Greene had hoped for in *his* poetry of errors: where the unretrospective past fails (though it does so very rarely) it lapses *into* continuity, accidentally betraying the “temporal continuum” that it seeks to hold perpetually in abeyance. As in Bowen, and in Greene's fiction and Reed's films, this all but hidden form of time is abstracted as an infinitely dense and extensive structure of metonymic relations, an “inhuman” system, as Marlowe puts it, in which all things “tie together” (955).¹²

If this figuration of time—as a system of continuous association radiating from an evacuated center—seems to have a kind of eschatological weight to it, this is perhaps because it

¹² Raymond Chandler, *Farwell, My Lovely, Stories and Early Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1995).

continues to resound late into the twentieth century as a general description of narrative—one that is still revived from time to time in the Derridean cliché that there is no “outside-text.” In a marginally narrower (if not much more concrete) sense, it resounds as the social-historical “totality” that Fredric Jameson will spend decades trying to detect in Chandler and elsewhere, sustained by the belief that Lyotard was mistaken in thinking that the “temporal continuum” through which the world used to be known had altogether disappeared.¹³ In any case, Marlowe himself is in no position, in his last moments, to see anything in its entirety or to know much at all. The chapter will finally show that, instead of looking backward to write himself into the system of relations, Marlowe tries quite literally to write himself out of it—foregoing the critical distance of the storyteller in favor of the aesthetic myopia of one who spends his career searching for continuity errors. “The Pencil,” that is to say, records no solution; but at least, as Marlowe puts it, “I saw the little touches that flaw the picture” (1266).¹⁴

¹³ Jameson’s essays on Chandler, which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3, have been collected as *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (New York: Verso, 2016).

¹⁴ Raymond Chandler, “The Pencil,” *Raymond Chandler: Collected Stories* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2002).

Chapter 1 - The Distinctions of the Present: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*

I. "THE IMMENSE TO-DAY"

While a major novel and a considerable output of short fiction and nonfiction would already qualify Elizabeth Bowen among the most prolific English writers of the Second World War, she also spent considerable effort at the time writing the story of her family. *Bowen's Court* (first published in 1942) was not intended, she says, to be a history book, but rather a study of memory. Yet, as it traces the history of the Anglo-Irish from Cromwell forward in the sequential figures of the Bowen patriarchs—closing in on the author in her own time—a very basic question takes on increasing complexity and urgency: *whose* memory? The stakes heighten when, early in the process of composition, war breaks out and the project takes on the proleptic quality of a suspense novel: "And to what," she departs from the 18th century to interject, "did our fine feelings, our intimacies, our inspiring conversations, our wish to be clear of the bonds of sex and class and nationality, our wish to try to be fair to everyone bring us? To 1939" (125).¹

If Bowen found her family's story at times to be, as she puts it, "Proustian in its sinister reconstruction of incident, in its demolition of accepted characters," she goes farther than Proust in her own study of memory, which obliquely reconstructs the outbreak of World War II as a kind of interminable incident—and not only demolishes character-types in the process, but links such a figural demolition to the literal demolition of the ancestral home, suspending memory outside of any typical notion of what a character might be thought to encompass. "Life in these house-islands," she writes,

¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court and Seven Winters* (London: Vintage, 1999).

has a frame of its own. Character is printed on every hour, as on the houses and demesne features themselves. With buildings, as with faces, there are moments when the forceful mystery of inner being appears. This may be a matter of mood or light. Come on round the last turn of its avenue, or unexpectedly seen down a stretch of lawn, any one of these houses—with its rows of dark windows set in the light façade against dark trees—has the startling, meaning and abstract clearness of a house in print, a house in which something important occurred once, and seems, from all evidence, to be occurring still (20).

At the time *Bowen's Court* was republished in 1964 with a new Afterword by the author—but not at the time these words were written—Bowen's court only existed as “a house in print,” having been torn down a few years earlier. This striking description, however, should not be taken as an allegory; nor are its moods and mysteries and surprises quite as gothic as they may seem, coming from one of the outstanding gothic writers of the 20th century; nor even should it suggest that Bowen (sometimes regarded as a precursor to postmodernism) on some level concedes that her history is tropologically haunted by a sort of metahistory, being *merely* as clear and as meaningful as it can be framed for print.²

Rather, it attempts to grapple in phenomenological terms with a disturbed conception of narrative temporality, one which is bound implicitly to impressions of war—though these had reached the isolated, outlandish Anglo-Irish setting of Bowen's Court only by a single radio

² I refer loosely here to “tropic” historiography in the tradition of Hayden White but mean also to imply a distinction between Bowen's concerns and those of the historiographic metafiction more conventionally associated with postmodernism. I will return to this distinction subsequently in the discussion of Bowen's fiction, but for more specific treatments of Bowen as a proto-postmodernist see, for instance, Robert L. Caserio, “The Heat of the Day: Modernism and Narrative in Paul de Man and Elizabeth Bowen,” *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History*, no. 2 (1993); or Yoriko Kitagawa, “Anticipating the Postmodern Self: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*,” *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, no. 5, (2000).

installed in its library, as “wave after wave of war news broke on the quiet air of the room” (457). Bowen addresses her reader in a kind of dilated present, which is given as an alternative to retrospection:

Knowing, as you now do, that the house is no longer there, you may wonder why I have left my opening chapter, the room-to-room description of Bowen’s court, in the present tense. I can only say that *I* saw no reason to transpose it into the past. There is a sort of perpetuity about livingness, and it is part of the character of Bowen’s Court to be, in sometimes its silent way, very much alive. (459)

This mysterious sense of a silent “perpetuity,” a state of being or a quality of memory that exceeds grammatical tense, takes shape in the chiasmic alternation of a scene’s “livingness” (whatever that might mean) and its printedness: “The land outside Bowen’s Court windows left prints on my ancestors’ eyes that looked out: perhaps their eyes left, also, prints on the scene? If so, those prints were part of the scene to me” (451).

Whose memory is signaled in the quasi-technical process of storage by which this scene is perpetuated? Even while recognizing Bowen’s religious convictions, it is difficult to reconcile such vivid, hallucinatory appearances of the structure of history—as though it were an optical phenomenon, a play of light—with the urgent realism and diligent historiographical commitments of *Bowen’s Court*, its attempt show a past without “false mystery,” its claim that “fantasy is toxic” (454, 455). If this is meant to be figurative (though I suspect that it is not) its metalepses are so dazzling as to more or less force one to take it literally as an empirical description of history staging itself—installing ancestral eyes as information technology—and in the process calling profoundly into question the status of Bowen’s “me” in such an inhuman scene.

In this context, it is instructive to pause to ask why Bowen, in her various generic turns, never wrote a historical novel (or at least one more typically historical than *The Heat of the Day*), and what it might have been like if she had.³ Elsewhere, in *Bowen's Court* and also in the fiction, one can sense an almost Lukácsian conviction that the particular whims and movements of her minor characters (in this case the Bowen patriarchs in the context of the Ascendancy) can be scaled up through various social and national “rings” in order to portray the grander forces and movements that define epochs.⁴ This is the process, she says, through which “unhistoric figures are made historic”—through which they are shown (with a degree of fantasy) to grapple with “nightmarish big analogies everywhere” but to rise from their former state of mystification. (454-5). Yet the passage cited above entails a dramatic narrowing of scope—or perhaps more accurately, a de-anthropomorphizing of scope—a total subordination of the metonymic potency of character to a set of optical (or textual) impressions relayed through time, more or less detached from even a centralized consciousness—let alone a social milieu or a nation.

W.J. McCormack has suggested, though without quite putting it this way, that *The Heat of the Day* (as a “contemporary-historical novel”) forms a fictional counterpoint to *Bowen's Court*, staging in dialectical terms the resolution of the “family disinclination to join in and personal attention to epochal change” that underlies much of the apparent ambivalence of

³ *The Last September* (1929) might vaguely qualify as one, though Bowen's work has not often been approached directly in these generic terms. But see Neil Corcoran's chapter “Discovery of a Lack: History and Ellipsis in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*,” *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); or Julia McElhattan Williams' “‘Fiction with the Texture of History’: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2 (June 1995): 219–42

⁴ “Rings” being, in Bowen's idiom, what Lukács tends to refer to more plainly in terms of *links* in *The Historical Novel*: i.e. “[The character] achieves...a many-sided and full expression of his personality, but only insofar as it is linked with the big events of history” (Lukács 45).

Bowen's Court (239)⁵. Ending her chronology rather abruptly at the brink of the First rather than the Second World War, Bowen herself does seem to suggest a need to counterpose the history she has written against some other kind of book:

Even in the little area I have covered...even in the little society...whose evolution, being also that of the Bowens, I have tried to describe, the events and plans and passions between the years 1914 and 1941 would make a book that should be as long again as the book I have written by now...The lives of my own people become a little thing; from 1914 they begin to be merged already into a chapter of a different history. (437)

The end of her study of memory is marked by a faltering of style, an increased tension in her sentences' tense structure as some new, apparently massive "now" takes over, an imposing figure of presentness that causes her ancestral figures to shrink from their metonymic attachments to memory: "I shall...say goodbye [to them] at the start of one war that War as we now know it encloses in its immense To-day" (437).

I take it that what appears here symptomatically as the encroachment of the singularizing incident of total war on Bowen's efforts to record the past, as past, is actually somewhat the opposite: that Bowen's reflexive shift to an inherently fictional conception of the present begins to shape her impressions of the temporality of war. One can see inklings of the novel to come. In *The Heat of the Day*, such grammatical stress-points will be amplified in what seems, against the terrifying inclination of the present to encompass the past, an attempt to modify the past tense so that it can in turn encompass the excesses of the present. As Michael North puts it, Bowen "calls upon the past tense in order to assert [her character's] existence in the present" because she feels

⁵ W J Mc Cormack, *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats and Bowen* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2011).

a “responsibility to speak of immediacy itself in terms of the past” (109, 126). Such temporal contortions control the novel’s sense of suspense, its calibration to a sort of general impression of war, with much more potency than does its generic affiliation with the spy novel: one only gets so far, as North suggests, by remarking that Bowen’s “prose style [is] as twisted and indirect as the motives of her characters” (109).⁶

Much of the scholarship on *The Heat of the Day*, regardless of objective or method, tends to start by pressing the novel towards one side or the other of this apparent conflict between the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past. Put a bit more concretely, one seems forced to decide in general terms whether the governing conflictual dynamics of Bowen’s prose are predominantly a *response* to the aerial bombardment of London, which Bowen experienced firsthand and which comprises much of the historical present of the novel; or whether, instead, the Blitz serves to *illuminate* its preconditions; whether, that is, the past inflects the present or the present inflects the past. This debate can be traced back through various critical scenes at least to the early 1980s, in Barbara Bellow Watson’s argument that, though the novel’s “disjointed present” is linked to its war-time setting, “a conviction is established...by the end...that the unreliability of knowledge and of people has been revealed rather than created by war” (93, 82).⁷ Any counterargument to—or elaboration of—this thesis might stake itself against the more sinister implications of this sort of faith in literary revelation, noted more recently by Brook Miller et al.: that such readings tend to seek out “resolutions that...ultimately posit the passage of the war as a solution to the human crises that drive the plot” (133).⁸

⁶ Michael North, *What is the Present?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁷ Barbara Bellow Watson, “Variations on an Enigma: Elizabeth Bowen’s War Novel,” *Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987) 81-101.

⁸ Brook Miller, with Luke Elward, Tessa Hempel and Philip Kollar, “Narrative, meaning and agency in *The Heat of the Day*, Elizabeth Bowen: *New Critical Perspectives*, edited by Susan Osborn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009) 132-48. The distinction between the pastness of the present and the presentness of

For various critical-historical reasons, however, this debate ends up largely eliding the efforts Bowen took in the self-conscious historiography of *Bowen's Court* (written before *The Heat of the Day*), as well as in its Afterword (written after), not only to articulate just this sort of question but to suggest a number of ways of answering it⁹:

I do not know how much, after that September of 1939, the color of my narration may have altered. The values with which I set out—my own values—did, at least to my own feeling, remain constant: they were accentuated rather than changed by war. The war-time urgency of the present, its relentless daily challenge, seemed to communicate itself to one's view of the past, until, to the most private act or decision, there attached one's sense of its part in some campaign. Those days, either everything mattered or nothing mattered. The past—private just as much as historic—seemed to me, therefore, to matter more than ever: it acquired meaning; it lost false mystery. In the savage and austere light of a burning world, details leaped out with significance. Nothing that ever happened, nothing that was ever even willed, planned or envisaged, could seem irrelevant. War is not an accident: it is an outcome. One cannot look back too far to ask, of what? (453)

the past in Bowen is of narratological and historiographical interest, but it might also subtend more specific questions about the literary-historical placement of her wartime fiction—whether, for instance, this work is best considered as a response to the immediate context of wartime London or whether, in its gothic mode, it restores a specifically Anglo-Irish tradition. This could be a bit of a false dichotomy, but as Thomas S. Davis has recently pointed out in *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), it stands as a basic rift in studies that seek to historicize Bowen's fiction. In his chapter, "War Gothic," Davis proposes a generic resolution in which Bowen is seen to "appropriate for a bombed imperial metropole" "a genre initially suited for a dying settler colonial class," such that her war stories "anticipate a historical recurrence of Anglo-Ireland's fate in postwar Britain" (174).

⁹ See, however, Anna Teekell's "Elizabeth Bowen and Language at War," *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2011): 61–79. Teekell does not treat Bowen as a historiographer, but considers *Bowen's Court* as an indispensable formal counterpart to *The Heat of the Day* and discovers a number of illuminating structural resonances between the two works.

It is perhaps facile to say that these lines, taken from the 1964 Afterward to *Bowen's Court*, might just as well have been composed as an afterword to *The Heat of the Day*, a novel about nothing so much as the extreme overburdening of detail in the “savage and austere light of a burning world.” But certainly Bowen’s historiographical reflections help frame the novel after the fact and even in the present. In a trivial sense, a generic turn to suspense fiction seems apt for a writer concerned minutely with the operations of “false mystery,” with the narrative processes against which “private” details take on a sense of exaggerated momentousness—and, by extension, with the “historic” processes against which the general urgency of the wartime moment, the constant abstract stress of “the present” per se, seems (as if by reflex) to resolve into a state of formal clarity and distinctness that is as surprising as it ought to have been predictable.

But Bowen’s work indicates a substantial alteration of the terms of the conventional thriller. Even as her Afterward to *Bowen's Court* is written in the past tense from the cold war vantage of the 1960s, this postscript to her war writing—its encapsulation of a certain form of suspense at a certain historical turning point—presents a “view of the past” that is curiously devoid of a sense of the future. In passing here, but with more clarity in *The Heat of the Day*, one can distinguish forms of suspense that operate largely without the anticipatory logic that would seem essential to them. By extension, and much more broadly, Bowen’s midcentury work marks a subtle but ubiquitous re-orientation of the existential ground of the 20th century novel, a literal and figurative mid-point between “perpetuities”: between, on the one hand, the chronic post-humanistic suspense of the cold war world—what Mark Seltzer calls “the unreal reality of the perpetual postwar condition” that extends “from World War II to World War Z” (25); and, on the

other hand, the more humanistic conditions of narrative suspense of which these might (if only in retrospect) be considered the “outcome.”¹⁰

Recently, Paul K. Saint-Amour has written of the latter in terms of the “tense future” of modernism, particularly as it shapes the literary experiments of the interwar years. Saint-Amour argues that the incidents of World War II were unusual in their capacity to traumatize *prospectively* those living at once with the memory of one war and in anticipation of another, to precipitate a kind of mourning-in-advance and a sense of “perpetual suspense.” Insofar as the narrative fiction composed between the wars could capture such experiences in “real time,” they instantiate a phenomenology—a “perpetual interwar” condition—that contravenes history’s official termini. In Saint-Amour’s retrospective view of the interminable prospects of late modernity, “expecting the unexpected” becomes a general state of being.¹¹ If this being resounds in perpetuity as a basic experiential condition of human life, then the contours of the “immense To-day” that it somehow seems to precede would be far more difficult to trace: what Bowen outlines is the almost unimaginable experience of unexpecting the expected.

II. FIGURAL EQUIVOCATION AND THE DEGRADATION OF SUSPENSE

The grotesque distention of the present into which *The Heat of the Day* opens, when “cigarettes would be soon to be seen to glow,” a “blurting” “incontinent” sound threatens, but more or less fails, to put the narrative in motion.¹² Issuing as it does from the peculiar vaginal mouth of the peculiarly named Louie Lewis—a mouth “caked round the edges, the edges only,

¹⁰ Mark Seltzer, *The Official World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹¹ See especially Chapter 2, “Perpetual Suspense: Virginia Woolf’s Wartime Gothic,” and the Conclusion, “Perpetual Interwar,” of *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

¹² Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002)

with what was left of lipstick, inside which clumsy falsified outline the lips turned outward, exposed themselves—full, intimate, woundable thin-skinned, tenderly brown-pink as the underside of a new mushroom”—it strikes, but does not move, its target. Yet the blow is accidental, for it was the speaker’s “self not her sex that she had wished to assert” (8-9). This insoluble metonymic confusion signals not so much a characterological disposition (i.e. a sense that, say, Louie is as false as her lipstick) as it does a set of temporal and figural crises: the hallucinogenic flux of Bowen’s past tense obscures the schemes by which the most basic conventions of intimacy (let alone the conventions of literary love) can be sensually organized.

Such language tends, for many readers of Bowen, to provoke nebulous, deconstructive fantasies of half-literal dissolution: bodies seem to come to pieces, the nature of nature, in all its kaleidoscopic new-mushroominess, is called into question—falsified while being rendered with more tenderness and distinctness than ever. This is deranged writing, as Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle put it in a frequently cited book: “more visibly and more sharply even than in the work of Henry James,” the novel “metamorphoses” into “stony clarity” as its “generic dissolution” is staged by the “telepathic network of multiple voices and identities” that constitutes Bowen’s “bizarre omniscient narrator” (83).¹³ If such studies of Bowen’s “strangeness”—most prominently, Maud Ellmann’s *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page*—have been important in bringing Bowen out of the shadow of James, they have also risked in turn shrouding her in a phantasmagoria of Derridian traces and specters, which seem too much at home to be easily dispelled.¹⁴

¹³ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

¹⁴ Maud Ellman, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

I raise this line of criticism up front not to critique deconstructive interpretations of Bowen in general, but to indicate a figural problem that is arguably quite distinct in her work. One confronts a tenacious reciprocity between figurative and descriptive language, a kind of stereoscopic quality to her sentences, which (like Louie's confusion of sex and self) show symptoms of a broader tension in her "bizarre omniscient narrator" between a perspective that is as extreme in its dissolute myopia and shortsightedness as it is in its perspicuity—that shifts jarringly between descriptive rumination and theoretical pronouncement, between detail and aphorism, instant and eternity.

Such tensions have often been described in terms of the *suspense* or *suspension* of Bowen's prose, terms which tend to fudge generic description with something even less distinct to try to get at whatever it is that haunts the conventional realism in her style.¹⁵ But to the extent that such accounts exceed the narrowest generic definitions of suspense, they often wind up rehearsing, through a postructural idiom, a set of oppositions that can be regarded as central to

¹⁵ For instance, Julian Wolfreys, in *Writing London - Volume 2: Materiality, Memory, Spectrality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), opposes varying forms of "narrative suspense" to "temporal movement" in Bowen's war writing—imagining that a spectral London manifests itself in her prose by way of a kind of rhetorical pausing apparatus (59-83). While critics have generally taken advantage of the punning flexibility of the forms of *suspense* (i.e. *suspension*, *suspendedness*, etc.) to figurally wrangle it to different ends, Claire Seiler has more recently drawn a sharper distinction between "suspense" of the "what-will-happen-next?" sort and "suspension" of the stopping-and-waiting-around sort. To me this distinction seems too rigid to account for the variability of Bowen's own use of the forms of *suspense*; and, more generally, the temporal dynamics of the novel are not reducible to a two-way tension between narrative motion (things happening) and counternarrative stasis (things not happening), as this chapter will show. See Claire Seiler, "At Midcentury: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*," *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2014): 125-45. The ghostliness or of Bowen's suspense is also more obviously a feature of her (sometimes uncertain) literary-historical placement in an Anglo-Irish gothic tradition. See Davis's "War Gothic," cited above; also W. J. McCormack, *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History Through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats, and Bowen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Margot Backus, *The Gothic Family Romance: Heterosexuality, Child Sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish Colonial Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

the narrative temporality of literary realism. Fredric Jameson's recent definition in *The Antinomies of Realism* is helpful here, in which

what we call realism...come[s] into being in the symbiosis...of storytelling with impulses of scenic elaboration, description and above all affective investment, which allow it to develop towards a scenic present which in reality, but secretly, abhors the other temporalities which constitute the force of the tale or récit in the first place. (11)

I will return subsequently to the question of the primacy of scenic elaboration, but for now I want simply to suggest that Bowen's temporalities of suspense and suspension are formally innovative in at least the important sense that, through an extraordinary exaggeration, they reveal just this sort of secret—but nevertheless preserve the fundamental symbioses of the realist narratives to which they so steadily refer. Considering how often Bowen herself uses variations of the term *suspense* in ways that leap out as ready-made emblems of her style, it is tempting to characterize the scene referenced at the start of this section as a moment of *suspended intimacy*—a moment that, as such, expresses something essential about the temporality of Bowen's fiction. But such phraseology threatens to redouble rather than explain the figural predicament at hand, implying a certain closeness to the text, a critical grasp on its effects, while at the same time rendering it ineffable, visceral (which is to say, calling it literature).

This impasse coincides with a basic definitional paradox of suspense, which is that it can be easily identified as something one feels even while, at the same time, understood to be strictly fictional or rhetorical; that one can sense it when, say, watching certain films or reading certain novels, or even when hearing a lecture or a speech, but that it may not be something actually ever experienced in real time. There is some philosophical precedent for raising this dilemma insofar

as it hints at the difficulty of disentangling what suspense *is* from its effects. The paradox I suggest here is correlative to what a number of theorists of suspense have approached more directly as *the* “paradox of suspense”; namely, that one can re-experience the effects of a suspenseful work of fiction the second time around even though suspense nominally depends on certain narrative manipulations of knowledge that would, by then, be spoiled.¹⁶ This crux, and questions related to it, have typically been approached from the perspectives of cognitive narratology or affect theory¹⁷; but for this study I will proceed not from the implication that suspense is always on some level *artificial*, but rather suggest that it is, in a more fundamental way, functionally *obsolete*—which is not precisely a matter of either effect or affect.

Suspense, that is to say, always seems to have undergone a terminological degradation that hinders its operations: it has lost some of its meaning on two vital fronts. Aside from its usage in the context of basic generic identification, it does not quite retain either literalness or figurativeness. It is more a pun than a phenomenon. Its figurative senses, to the extent that these tend to refer to affective responses to fiction—its hangings, its tensions, its forces, and so forth—are often taken up quite literally—on the faces of cliffs, across suspension bridges, in outer space; while its literal sense, to the extent that it refers to the holding in abeyance of a payment or promise, usually appears as a metaphor for a technique of narrative manipulation, a kind of epistemological craftwork (as in Hitchcockian suspense, which depends, as it were, on the granting and withholding of knowledge in careful balance). *Suspense*, then, is not yet a dead metaphor—but is one that seems in a rather unique way to be perpetually dying, is un-dead; and

¹⁶ For an overview of this topic in contemporary philosophy, see Noël Carroll, “The Paradox of Suspense,” *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) or Juan A. Prieto-Pablos, “The Paradox of Suspense,” *Poetics*, no. 26 (1998): 99-113.

¹⁷ See note above, and, for a more extensive collection of cognitive approaches to suspense, Peter Vorderer, Hans J. Wulff, Mike Friedrichsen (eds.), *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses and Empirical Explorations* (New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1996).

so its usage pulls it at once towards and away from that particular linguistic void into which tired, over-stressed metaphors are so prone to plummet.

This tenuous figure is what contextualizes the scene of suspended intimacy cited above, inflecting almost every word and phrase:

Having hung for just that instant more suspended the music now broke with a light crash. The audience let out a breath and settled into its attitudes on the chairs. Evening had gained on the theatre even in that mean-time; a more perceptible smell of it stole from under the thickets, rose from the trodden grass. Cigarettes would be soon to be seen to glow. On the stage, the musicians' grouped black seated bodies had fastened to them the faces and hands of ghosts. They were to continue to play till the clock in the distance struck—but for how long, how much longer, it was being wondered in the emptying ranks of chairs, would they be able to see their score? (11).

The scene here is altogether bound up with the intricate uncertainty of the status of *suspendedness* as a kind of metaleptic irritant. The word itself divides the initiatory sentence into perfect syllabic symmetry, *appearing* to hold its halves in suspension before the latent puns can even begin to hint at what that might *mean*. This apparent symmetry exists in further tension with the word's disruption of how the unpunctuated sentence scans: it can belong to either clause, or to both at once. Having first hung then crashed, its figurative connotations then begin to morph as the senses of suspense are concatenated from one phrase to the next, flitting in and out of what, in such a cinematic sequence, might with particular aptness be called the diegesis. It transforms into a rhetorical effect, having been, one now learns, holding the audience breathless on the edge of its seats. It transforms again into a metaphor for a certain type of narrative

temporality, the “mean-time” which pervades this scene and so many others in *The Heat of the Day*, collecting phenomenological weight as it begins to distend the prose—“cigarettes would be soon to be seen to glow”—before returning again to its rhetorical form, this time to attach to the bodies of the musicians in their capacity to captivate the crowd. Finally, the clock strikes in the distance to force a sudden perspectival enlargement of the scene: the locus of suspense is, in an instant, scaled up to encompass the whole city of London in the grim, inexorable metonymy by which the darkness overtaking the score and thinning the crowd is linked to the memory and anticipation of the arrival of the *Luftwaffe*.

It is important to note that this concert takes place in the middle of the war, about two years after the Blitz, so that these transient forms of suspense are not quite imminent but rather a kind of residue, producing something like the atmosphere Bowen reports in a 1948 sketch of postwar Prague:

Suspense tightened the air all the time I was there. Was this no more than climatic? Was this a residual suspense, left behind by the Occupation, unable, so far, to have dissolved because there had been so much of it? It was open to me to think so – I could not think so, quite. We were still in the middle of something; destiny was not finished. (84)¹⁸

In capturing their protracted decay, Bowen’s prose does not mimic or redouble the forms of suspense that permeate it. It does not draw readers to the edge of seats but rather into a state of laborious, interrupted concentration, sending the eye backwards to scan and rescan words and phrases, the senses of which only take shape retroactively and with effort. Suspense, suspendedness, suspension in all its intricate transformations is depleted, depurated from the

¹⁸ Elizabeth Bowen, “Prague and the Crisis,” *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

scene, but kept half-alive. I doubt that anyone has ever called a Bowen novel a page turner; and I don't think it would be controversial to assert that, in *The Heat of the Day*, the belabored, Hamlet-like suspension of the question of the lover's betrayal of his nation—which will set up the ostensible plot—loses its pull long before the answer is blurted out incontinently and semi-incoherently towards the end of the book, which nevertheless must be finished.¹⁹

This technique of figural equivocation, while subtler than others that might be called metafictional, does function to hold some of the narrative special effects of the realist novel in abeyance—to reveal, borrowing again Jameson's idiom, something of the “secret” draw of the “scenic present.” One can find this as a nascent quality of Bowen's earlier fiction. In *The Death of the Heart* (1938), to take one vivid (if somewhat esoteric) example, the young protagonist Portia finds herself at one point “[feeling] something in the joints of her knees, which shook” while, half-relevantly, “the Sunday smell of the joint [the cook] was basting crept underneath the crack of her door” (268). Though the term is neither quite dead nor quite a metaphor, the excessive bodily presence and literalness of the doubled *joint* nevertheless gives otherwise bare scenic description the reflexive quality of a pun, of a figure of speech coming to life—so that when, a few chapters later, Portia, in a friend's grip, feels her “joint untense,” the odd locution has an accumulated air of metalepsis about it that is as vague, obscure and pointless to any narrative or figural developments in the novel as it is conspicuous for the way it *ought* to produce a scenic effect that never quite transpires.²⁰

The technique seems more refined in the wartime fiction (somehow it is accomplished even in the mere naming of a character, say, Louie Lewis); it gains increasing prominence in her

¹⁹ Seiler, for instance, characterizes the novel as a “counter-thriller” and suggests that, with its lack of conventional suspense, it provides the “antidote” to works like Graham Greene's *The Third Man* (141).

²⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000)

later work (*A World of Love* (1954), for instance, has a character who habitually sucks eggs as if doing so only because she's a figurative *egg-suck* or to enact the familiar dismissal, *go suck an egg*); and it reaches an apparent extreme in her final work, *Eva Trout* (1968)—the title of which lends itself to all manner of fishy puns throughout the novel. The most sustained study of the peculiar punning quality of Bowen's prose is to be found in Bennett and Royle's *The Dissolution of the Novel*, which describes the "ghoulish paronomasia" of *Eva Trout* (151). But critics of Bowen continue to be (and have since her own time been) varyingly intrigued and put off by the word-play, which seems eccentric, disruptive or out of place in ways that have proven somewhat difficult to account for.

If *The Heat of the Day* is thus marked by "linguistic upheaval," as Mc Cormack puts it, this is perhaps most prominent in the novel's senses of suspense. These undergo baffling concatenations not just at the lexical and figural levels indicated above, but in the form of the novel itself, which takes shape through an intricate juxtaposition of characters and character-types, all with varying temporal orientations. More than just the critical "demolition of character" and sinister reconstruction of incident that she associates with Proust—and that would align more generally with modernist reorganizations of memory, perspective and narrative temporality—her reconstruction of the scene of war stages the meticulous degradation of each possible form of suspense that might make its incidents seem to be, or to have been, present in some forcefully singular way.

This speaks directly to how, as Bowen writes in the Afterword cited above, "the color of my narration may have altered" in "the war-time urgency of the present." Without ever quite suggesting a postmodernist reflex towards parody or humor, the figural instability of suspense not just as a genre or an affect but as a kind of perpetual pun holds in relief the fictionality of the

extreme sense of presentness with which the novel is so persistently at odds. This extended reflexivity amounts to an “overfulfillment of the norms inherent to the [thriller] genre,” as Armen Avanesian and Anke Hennig put it, speaking in particular of suspense fiction written in the present tense—and in doing so effects the “exposure of the gears of its affect machinery” (68).²¹ Bowen’s narrator provides the following formula, which, in accentuating the relation of what *has been felt* and what *is to be felt* to “what is happening,” seems also to render that relationship especially tenuous, forcing “now” into scare quotes:

The relation of people to one another is subject to the relation of each to time, to what is happening. If this has not always been felt—and as to that who is to know—it has begun to be felt, irrevocably. On from now, every moment, with more and more of what had been “now” behind it would be going on adding itself to the larger story. (217)

Aggregated, the novel’s “morphologies of suspense” (to borrow Saint-Amour’s label) outline the distinctions of the present in such a way that “now” comes to “untense” its phenomenological grip on real time.

III. THE BEGINNING OF THE NEWS (THE PASTNESS OF THE PRESENT)

In sticking to the past tense in order to write retrospectively and sometimes prospectively of the present, of “what is happening,” Bowen ensnares her prose in some of the most persistent and intractable aporias of conventional past tense narration, and for the most part she seems to be doing so deliberately. In a way—though without an avant-garde impulse to declare the novel formally extinct—*The Heat of the Day* functions as a kind of retrospective of the novelistic

²¹ Armen Avanesian and Anke Hennig, *Present Tense: A Poetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

moment, a critical compendium of narrative techniques by which novels became equal to the present—before, so to speak, the present became what it is today.

Bowen criticism has tended, from different angles, to track a single fundamental temporal distinction in her work, what I simplify in the preface of this chapter as a division between the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past. The former is an effect that, for much of the history of the novel, is inherent in the tense structure of narration, which typically renders events imagined to have been present as past in the act of recording or storytelling; the latter is an effect that seems to operate independently of grammatical tense, for instance in the ways that fictions are, as it were, presented to or made present to readers even if they are supposed to issue from a factual or imagined past. While such tensions often seem to underlie discussions of the historicity of Bowen's work (as opposed to its fictionality or narrativity, *per se*), they proceed more or less directly from the canonic formalist distinction between *sujet* and *fabula* and comprise an instructive testing ground for theories of fictionality following Käte Hamburger's influential effort to discharge the fictional present from the ordinary logic of grammatical tense.²²

But this basic dichotomy is inadequate to Bowen's "immense To-day," the distinctions of which proliferate as she delimits the present, marking it reflexively in the "relation of people to one another [as] subject to the relation of each to time." A phenomenological conception of the pastness of the present is introduced within the first pages of the novel by way of Louie Lewis, whose perspective focalizes the scene of suspended intimacy discussed in the previous section. Even though she turns out to be a minor character, Louie's temporal orientation will appear

²² Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1973). Michael North has recently brought these traditions directly to bear on Bowen's fiction. In his chapter, "Narrative and 'The Unexplained Instant,'" in *What is the Present?* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018), North triangulates Louie Lewis's peculiar present in the context of theories of the novel, of fictionality, and of narrative in order to question some of the most basic assumptions that have been made about the temporal formations of narrative fiction and about the relation of tense to time more generally (109-135).

increasingly distinct as it is reflected in the presentness of the past of the novel's principal villain, the Nazi informant Robert Kelway—but several other such relations are to be established first and will remain in perpetual conflict.

“With regard to time,” Louie suffers from what Bowen's critical narrator calls “an infant lack of stereoscopic vision,” though this critical distance tends to collapse when Louie is the focus of the scene: “she saw then and now on the same plane; they were the same” (15). Louie's *now*—explicitly and not just as an accident of narrative convention—is identified by its *thenness*: “She now, that is to say, within these last years, never left London, having been left with no place to go”; “At present, though bodily seated on a chair on a darkening slope listening to music, she was in effect again in the park rose garden, where she had been walking that afternoon” (14, 15). In each case the familiar past tense of the fictional present is uniquely disorienting. This is especially true of the latter, in which the slight pastness of literary language seems only a brief, ineffectual snag in a sentence sent tumbling down a “darkening slope” of retrospection: “At present” slips first into a past that might as well be present (she was “bodily seated on a chair”) then into a past that is more definitively past by virtue of it being repeatable (“she was in effect again in the park”) before landing decisively in the past perfect (“where she had been walking that afternoon”).

This tense predicament is, for Louie, an existential one—a crisis presented most vividly to Louie herself in the form of an intractable query: *when was the beginning of the news?* As if desperate to bring her retrogressive now in line with “what is happening,” Louie develops an intense infatuation with newspapers:

[She] came to love newspapers physically; she felt a solicitude for their gallant increasing thinness and longed to feed them; she longed to fondle a copy still

warm from the press, and, in default of that, formed the habit of reading crouching over her fire so as to draw out the smell of print...She was unable to watch a portion of fish being wrapped up in newspaper without a complex sensation in which envy and vicarious bliss merged. At the factory, she was drawn to girls and women in whom the same fermentation was to be felt at work—also, thanks to her daily build-up, she felt, and therefore appeared, less odd. (169-70)

Much could be written about this extraordinary love scene for which there is not ample space here, but the result of its consummation is the anchoring of Louie's perspective and its immediate social valuation, her discovery for the first time that "she *had* got a point of view, and not only *a* point of view but the right one" (168, emphasis original). In providing her with an "account of herself" as a human person in the context of the current of events, the news works something like a compressed *Bildungsroman*, vicariously stabilizing her character within a social typology otherwise at odds with her "odd" relation to time (168).

Yet the basic temporal incompatibility persists: in relation to the news, Louie's infant consciousness suffers a "disadvantage owing to having begun in the middle," interminably compelled to incorporate "how it had all begun"—for "evidently one thing must have led to another, as in life" (167). This "daily build-up" works as a form of inverted suspense, offering no promise of release, replacing the propulsive force of a tangible end with that of a formless beginning. Unable to pin Louie's backsliding present to some other kind of *now* that might suspend its historical encroachment, the narrator defers to a sort of eternal narrative recursion: "If you could not keep track of what was happening you could at least take notice of what was

said—in the beginning was the word; and to that it came back in the long run. This went for anything written down” (167).

If there is an air of condescension, even humor, in how the narrator treats Louie, it seems to me that the novel’s irony only extends so far as to cast passing doubt on the conviction that English wartime journalism conveyed what Louie calls “ideas”—as opposed to the mere ideology of German propaganda (170).²³ This view is obviously suspect coming from an ignorant, childlike woman whose values and sense of self are produced entirely by her fanatic sensual engagement with newspapers. Reference to *Bowen’s Court*, however, lends this rather off-hand critique of the social function of the news a broader philosophical and theological heft. Louie’s quandary, though marginal to the plot of the novel, in fact gives voice to Bowen’s own retrogressive pursuit of the first cause of the present: “War,” to recall a key passage from her auto-historiography, “is not an accident: it is an outcome. One cannot look back too far to ask, of what?”

Beyond seeming to encapsulate a whole phenomenology of time and philosophy of history, Louie’s tense crisis signals what is arguably an altogether new form of narration. When it is focalized through Louie, more than through any other character in the novel, the conventional literary past tense seems untenable. It is contorted to its breaking point. In a work whose prose functions as a kind of garrison against the perils of an impending *now*, Louie poses the greatest narratorial threat, insinuating that the present cannot be confined or relegated to the past (grammatically or otherwise) because, in the form of the novel—unlike in the news—the

²³ As someone who worked for the Ministry of Information, reporting on Irish public opinion during the war as Britain shaped its strategy towards Ireland’s official neutrality, Bowen’s engagements with the forms of wartime propaganda are much more complex than this passing reference is meant to imply. For more on this topic, see Megan Faragher, “The Form of Modernist Propaganda in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*” *Textual Practice*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2013): 49-68.

two are constitutively bound up with one another. Avanesian and Hennig argue quite compellingly that one of the most substantial literary-historical developments of the postwar period is the advent of the present tense novel. This new form articulates what they call an “asynchronous present,” a *now* that is, like Louie’s, “contemporaneous with its past,” “that calls up an anteriority at the same time as it calls up the present” (as in Pynchon: “It has happened before but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late” [69]). Though *The Heat of the Day* appears on barely this side of the war, one finds in Louie (even against Bowen’s more conservative impulses) the postwar novel already on the absolute verge of shifting resolutely into the present tense—just at the moment when its present is most thoroughly past.

IV. THAT WAS THAT (THE DIFFERENTIATED INSTANT)

The novel’s first clear distinction of the present takes form in the contrast of Louie’s lack of “stereoscopic vision” with respect to time against a “curious trait” of the man (named at first only Harrison) with whom she feels she has shared that musical moment of suspended intimacy in the park: “One of his eyes either was or behaved as being just perceptibly higher than the other. This lag or inequality in his vision gave her the feeling of being looked at twice—being viewed then checked over again in the same moment” (9). Without inflecting the novel’s sense of immediacy with a sense of duration, *per se*, he does introduce a sort of qualitative differentiation to the present—at least insofar as anything that might qualify for him as a discrete moment does so twice at the same time. While the “lag” of Louie’s *now* draws it into the past,

Harrisons *now* and the one that lags behind it—or rather below it—occupy the same instant.²⁴

While Louie's *now* is asynchronous, Harrison's is asymmetrical.

This constitutive asymmetry is registered outwardly not just as an ocular imbalance—which seems to induce a temporal vertigo effect for anyone who sees him seeing—but more concisely in his “that-was-that” mustache (9). As the phrase *that was that* is repeated time and again in association with Harrison, its equation— $x=x$ —takes on a sense of internal unevenness such that the second x seems qualitatively distinct from the first in much the same manner, say, as one apprehends the *tick, tick* of the clock as *tick, tock*. Against the destructive leveling effect of Louie's temporal monocularism, Harrison's synthetic vision of the instant works, as Deleuze will put it, to draw difference from repetition.²⁵

Even as his position is defined through a kind of obscure perceptual immediacy as opposed to a more perspicuous narrative teleology, he instates the closest thing the story has to a conventional narrative impulse: as far as visual metaphors go, Harrison's temporal asymmetry seems more or less adequate to get the arrow of time, if not horizontal, at least pointed in enough of a direction to lay groundwork for the basic Aristotelian scheme of beginning, middle and end so dismally lacking for Louie. Although, naturally, he does so twice at the same time: “Odd,”

²⁴ In switching somewhat loosely between these terms (i.e. *now*, *instant*, *moment*)—my intention is not to obscure or ambiguate a conception of the present, but rather to underscore the novel's multivalent senses of immediacy—the way such familiar figures of speech cut across the singularity of the concept of the present, delineating its fictionality rather than its basis in time. The arbitrariness of such designations is a point the novel raises explicitly: “Sixty seconds make a minute, sixty minutes make an hour; but how many *moments* are there?... How long, compared to a minute, is a moment?” asks Robert's niece, to which his gnomic reply is “*That depends*” (294-5, emphasis original). Even as they vary, these terms in their repetition do end up constituting a sort of hierarchy, albeit a tenuous and inconsistent one: *now* is generally the most arbitrary, a rhetorical marker, a zero point; an *instant* seems to have some minimal quality of human experience about it, involving the apprehension of time, the intermittent sense of it passing; and a *moment* takes on meaning or import, such that “a lifetime without moments” would be merely “an existence amongst tables and chairs, without rapture or mystery, grace or danger” (295).

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

remarks the novel's central character, Stella Rodney, in discovering that she occurs for Harrison in dual plots, "that I should have turned up in two different stories." "Yes," he replies. "But it's amazing how often that sort of thing does happen" (149).

Perhaps, then, the novel's most unexpected surprise—and perhaps even its most suspenseful turn—is the moment when Harrison himself seems suddenly to disappear from *all* of the novel's stories: "You see, I've no idea how we left it," says Stella of Harrison to her lover Robert Kelway (now revealed to be a Nazi informant) as the two draw out their final moment together, unsure of its ending. As if in acknowledgement that such things should be said twice with respect to Harrison, she is forced by circumstance to repeat herself: "I've no idea how we left it"—which provokes in Kelway a racking, desperate, convulsive "laughter of the entire being" at the sheer conventionality of the phrase—the sublime blandness of its repetition:

The expression on those lips of hers was familiar—its many contexts, vagrant, social, so very much not mattering, had become too many for him to count. It had come as the end, or rather the fading-out of so many stories at the end of so many days; or, as a sort of confession as to why many stories, *now that she came to tell them*, had no ending...She had been given the slip once more. "I've no idea how we left it." Ineffectual little expression, blent of boredom and chagrin, it had become conventional; but, at the same time, a sort of convention or shorthand of lovers' talk, stamped with a temperament and endeared by usage. She had said this so many times: again it was said tonight—and the monstrous life-and-death disproportion between tonight's context and all that host of others did not, could not, stand out as it should. (321, emphasis added)

Since Harrison is the counter-spy, his “monstrous” abeyance puts Kelway’s fate in suspense. But relegated to the endlessly repeatable “now” of conventional storytelling, the anticipation of Harrison’s return is rendered “ineffectual” at the moment it should be most effective. There’s a forceful allegorical feedback loop at work here: not knowing how things have been left with Harrison is *cause* for suspense, but the phrase “I’ve no idea how we left it” itself *stands* for the suspense it is supposed to cause, and only as such—as a “little expression,” a narratorial cliché “stamped with a temperament and endeared by usage” —does it re-enter the diegesis, where now it no longer functions as anything but a signal of the effect it does not have.

The entire passage has a winking air about it, operating as a diffused pun: “The expression on those lips of hers was familiar.” This “expression” is bodily, aural, textual; it is the shape of lips, it issues from lips and can be read there; it is “familiar” as convention, as intimacy, as a figure of speech; it is sensual and rhetorical and funny for being both at the same time. And, indeed, Stella finds herself compelled to laugh as well—perhaps, though, only at the uneasy irony, “now that she came to tell” it, of committing the potent and frightening presence of Harrison’s *that was that* to the bored, conventional past of everyday storytelling: “I see how it sounded,” she admits, “but that *was* how it was” (322, emphasis original).

V. EVERYTHING NOW (THE UNDIFFERENTIATED INSTANT)

Against the qualitative differentiation of the present for which Harrison stands, the novel introduces the temporal predicament of Roderick, Stella Rodney’s only child. As a young man inevitably called to the Army, Roderick presents the quintessential picture of modernity beset by routine, by the worst trajectories of bureaucratic social order, by the encroaching systemization and depersonalization of will and action: “I’ll really try to exert myself, if you’d rather,” says

Roderick to his mother, “But I don’t think the Army’s quite what it was in your day—everything now depends on so much else” (56). Stella fears not her son’s death but that “in the course of a process, a being processed...her son might possibly disappear...She dreaded dissolution inside his life, dissolution never to be repaired” (50). This expressly modern pathology extends to the apprehension of time, so that the “mysterious flutter...which used to emanate from the minutes seemed to stop”—so that, as “everything now,” each instant is as indistinguishable from as it is interdependent with every other (58).

Roderick’s relation to time becomes increasingly important as the novel’s core of humanism begins to appear coterminous with the forms of suspense—and by extension immediacy itself—that *The Heat of the Day* works to delimit. Roderick apprehends the world with “suspended, dispassionate curiosity” and has been rendered inert: “his heart had never moved from its place, having felt no pull from a moving thing” (66, 64). His desires, if they can be called that, are programmatic, positional, less than human—no more than the “idealization of pattern”: “What he liked about people was the order in which they could be arranged” (65). The result is that he lives in a world in which objects and moments alike are metonymically unmoored, interchangeable, de-acclimatized, such that any particular thing or instant is “without environment”—so that, for instance, the sofa in his mother’s flat “might have been some derelict piece of furniture exposed on a pavement after an air raid or washed up by a flood on some unknown shore” (57). The dereliction of “everything now” induces a kind of geographic dispersal of what should be the affective, temporal and psychological domain of the novel; it induces a general redistribution of suspense—of the intermittent tensions of the ticking clock and its bodily effects:

It was...as though the inner tension of London were being struck and struck without breaking. Heard or unheard, the city at war ticked over—if from this quarter, from these immediate streets, the suction of cars in private movement was gone, there was all the time a jarring at the periphery, an unintermittent pumping of vital traffic through arterial streets into arterial roads. Nor was that quite all: once or twice across the foreground of hearing a taxi careered as though under fire. (59)

Against this collectivized, anthropomorphic background tone of the lifeform of London at war— of “all of the time” of the present outlined, peripheralized through its scenic elaboration—the novel introduces an important alternate temporality, what it tentatively calls the “historic future,” a future that, neither quite utopian nor quite nostalgic, precludes anticipation. The single defining feature of Roderick’s existence is that he has been named heir, by an estranged family member, to Mount Morris—an Irish estate in Cork clearly modeled after Bowen’s Court. The “historic future” of Mount Morris—its scenic ulteriority—excludes the present but somehow functions to submerge the tautly suspended routine of “everything now” in a countervailing fantasy of absolute suspenselessness. To clarify this concept, it will be useful here to quote at length:

The house came out to meet his growing capacity for attachment; all the more, perhaps, in that by geographically standing outside war it appeared also to be standing outside the present. The house, nonhuman, became the hub of his imaginary life, of fancies, fantasies only so to be called because circumstance outlawed them from reality. Submerged, soporific and powerful, these fancies made for his acquiescence to the immediate day. Weather he sought them out or

they him; whether they nourished him or he them, could not be said. They did not amount to desires, being without object nor to hallucinations, for they neither deceived him nor set up tension. Now he was in the Army, they filled those pockets of vacuum underlying routine. They were at their most vivid, most satisfying, in the bodily coma before sleep; but through the day they diversified those long docile will-less waits for his turn for something further to happen, fatigues, inspections, or simply hanging about. (52)

“Simply hanging about”—again the nature of wartime suspense, and its imaginary counterparts in wartime fiction, are at once punningly undermined, accentuated and “diversified”; and though this passage is rich with historic and biographical resonance, it is difficult not to read its fantasy of a “historic future”—its illicit abjuration of “reality”—in generic terms as a dual critique of the temporal logic of conventional realism. It is an attempt to conceptualize, by way of some “nonhuman” “hub of imaginary life,” a narrative vantage that would subsume both retrospection and prospection at once, bypassing the present while cultivating and preserving its formal distinctions.

In thus staking out an early claim to the scenic terrain of the post-human thriller, Bowen runs up against a unique set of formal problems—most glaring of which is that the object of the historic-futural novel, unlike that of the historical novel, would exist at the absolute margin of human interest and “attachment.” Whose memory, whose identity, whose “nourishment” is at stake here if it can be represented neither as the “private movement” of an individual caught up in the “tension[s]” of history nor as some vital intimacy or collectivity that takes form as the result of its cataclysms and catastrophes?²⁶ The question is framed most poignantly, perhaps, in

²⁶ Roderick’s relation to time militates against an overly optimistic or humanistic reading of one of the novel’s most famous descriptions of life in London during the Blitz, which is often quoted in celebration

the novel's final bit of dialogue between Stella and her son, as the two grapple to make something of her lover's death:

"There's *something* to be said" [Stella insists.]...

"I know...But by me? Why me? After all who am I?

"The only person I can tell...I cannot help expecting something from you: I must."

"You want me to be posterity?...Mother today I would say anything to comfort you; I do wish I had enough experience...As it is, I expect really you know what is best for yourself."

"I expect I do; I know I ought to; I must.—But the thing was, you were an outside person."

"You do really think I am a person?" (337-8, emphasis original)

VI. SELF-EVIDENCE (THE PRESENTNESS OF THE PAST)

Before returning again to this persistent quandary, it will be necessary briefly to enumerate the generic options and novelistic forms that *The Heat of the Day* seems more or less resolutely to desert. These can largely be grouped as conventions by which novels effect, as Avanesian and Hennig put it, the "presentification" of the past—by which events supposed to be past are made imaginatively present to the reader from the "epic" vantage of conventional

of the classless utopia it seems to discover amid the literal and figurative collapsing of the city: "Among the crowds still eating, drinking, working, travelling, halting, there began to be an instinctive movement to break down indifference while there was still time. The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned. In that September transparency people became transparent, only to be located by the just darker flicker of their hearts. Strangers saying 'Goodnight, good luck,' to each other at street corners, as the sky first blanched then faded with evening, each hoped not to die that night, still more not to die unknown" (99-100).

past tense narration. The way such narration draws the past up as a fictional present is essentially the inverse of the way Louie's (asynchronous) present is drawn into a fictional past. What's largely in question here is the historicity of narrative forms: to render past events (factual or imagined) *as if* they are present is to automatically furnish them with the markers of fictionality. This seems to go for historical fiction as well as non-fiction; and, insofar as such temporal formations muddy the historiographical claims of narrative in general, they become the default target of postmodern historiographic metafiction, as canonically defined by Hutcheon.

The Heat of the Day does not fit cleanly into this genre of postmodern thought, but to the extent that it works to circumscribe the "presentifying" function of narrative—the phenomenological expression of the presentness of the past—this is, with remarkable consistency, associated with Robert Kelway, the Nazi informant who emerges as the novel's central villain (if it can be said to have one). Kelway's mysterious temporal predicament takes shape in the somewhat ironic—even grotesque—convergence of the idioms of criminology, psychoanalysis, and Gothic romance: "Here's my criminal record," the suspected traitor declares to his lover as she tours his childhood bedroom; for her part, Stella regards Robert's family relations as his "case-history," searching "down there" for some hidden pathology of which treason or Nazism might be symptomatic; and from the point of view of the narrator, the experience of the Kelway's haunted country house follows Stella back to London "like a disaffecting ghost, undoing the reality of the city" (112, 129, 138). As familiar novelistic paradigms referenced directly or through the motifs of cases, criminal records and ghosts, each of these idioms offers Stella the (doubtful) prospect of not only *explaining* or *understanding* Kelway's behavior but—in an intimate visit to the family home, to the scene of the crime—of *experiencing* first-hand his past as if it were present. Far from offering epistemological stability

(or, for that matter, plot development), the “presentification” of Kelway’s past has the effect, as the narrator puts it, of “undoing” “reality”—of staging the fictionality of the present itself at the very moment that the psychic conditions and preconditions of war are supposed to synchronize with it in the reader’s imagination.

The scenic effect of this process is opposite to that of Louie’s *now*, which careers freely into the past: in the Kelway home (called Holme Dene) each passing instant—what Stella labels “*then—and then—and then,*” pointing to photographs arranged like a galaxy on Robert’s bedroom walls—gloms together in a kind of gunky mass, which is endlessly extruded into a suspended present (129, emphasis original). Stella sees this family “suspended in the middle of nothing,” and imagines them in the future remaining “so suspended when there *was* nothing more” (emphasis original). This is so because of the persistence of the past in the present: while what Stella leaves behind her “dissolves behind her,” what Kelway leaves behind is “not to be denied,” as time itself has “clogged” the ticking of the clock and books have “gummed together in some sort of secretion from their disuse” (125, 117, 128).

The paradoxical result of the excessive presentness of the past is a prevailing sense of emptiness: as the two examine the photographic evidence of Robert’s life, his “criminal record,” Stella is taken by surprise: “Robert, this room feels empty!” He agrees: “It could not feel emptier than it is. Each time I come back again into it I’m hit in the face by the feeling that I don’t exist—that I not only am not but never have been. So much so that it’s extraordinary coming in here with you.” Kelway seems almost to understand that he is in a novel, that his being is comprised not of “moments,” as he puts it, but of “imitation ones” (129). If the accumulation of the past in the Kelways’ present functions, as Stella reflects, to make their “position” “self-

evident,” then the most forcefully self-evident fact (or, rather, fiction) of Robert’s being is that he isn’t.

If this revelation does not add up to a characterological explanation of treason, it does serve to bring the novel’s various philosophical concerns more directly in line with the major themes of the European existential phenomenology of Bowen’s time. What is at issue in Kelway’s betrayal of his nation are fundamental questions about free will and authenticity—and more generally about the ethical implications of ontology. There isn’t space here to examine the novel in more rigorous philosophical terms, but the influence of Sartre rings rather loudly in the idea that it is not Kelway’s *being*—the self-evident “facticity” of his situation—but rather the *negation* of his being that condemns him to act as he will. The impulse to betray “isn’t something in me[,] it’s on altogether another scale, ” he will say later on to Stella in a (largely incoherent) attempt at self-justification—and, in a more pointed complaint, there is “no alternative” to freedom (301, 302).²⁷ In its affinity with Nazism and its apparent incompatibility with democratic individualism, there is perhaps a more profound, if more distant, echo in Kelway’s temporality of Heidegger’s *ekstasis*—an impression that, if it is to be more authentic than an “imitation moment,” Kelway’s present must stand outside of itself and drag the accruals of the

²⁷ If the direct influence of Sartre seems self-evident, here, it has not readily been noted, even though Bowen wrote two reviews of Sartre’s work for the *Tatler* in the late 1940s, close to the time of the publication of *The Heat of the Day*. See her “Review of *The Street* by Ann Petry, *The Age of Reason* by Jean-Paul Sartre, and *Dangling Man* by Saul Bellow,” *Tatler*, 184 (19 Apr 1947): 86–7 and her “Review of *Samuel Pepys: The Man Making* by Arthur Bryant and *The Reprieve* by Jean-Paul Sartre,” *Tatler*, 187 (21 Jan 1948): pp. 86–7. The only extended study of the influence of French existentialism on Bowen is Nathaniel Underland’s recent “Disaffection and *Realpolitik* in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*,” *Textual Practice* (Apr 2018). Underland reads the novel in the context of the nascent Cold War (rather than the Blitz) as a statement of commitment to policies of liberal internationalism. This signals Bowen’s twofold disaffection with literary realism and with political realism (*realpolitik*)—a disaffection shaped, Underwood argues, by her reading of Sartre.

past along with it in its prospective involvements—involvements which, with a fall (Heidegger’s principal figure of being present in the world), the novel cuts dramatically short.

VII. TURNING POINT (THE RHETORICAL PRESENT)

Perhaps the simplest reason that Kelway’s self-justification ends up being more or less incomprehensible is that he has devoted himself to making words meaningless, to stripping what the lovers call conventional “little expressions”—or what Heidegger calls “idle talk” (*Gerede*)—of the dusty accumulations of common understanding:

What is repulsing you is the idea of ‘betrayal,’ I suppose, isn’t it? [he asks Stella].
In you the hangover from the word? Don’t you understand that all that language is dead currency? How they keep on playing shop with it all the same: even you do.
Words, words like that, yes—what a terrific dust they can still raise in a mind, yours even. Myself, even, I have needed to immunize myself against them; I tell you I have only at last done that by saying them to myself over and over again till *it became absolutely certain they mean nothing*. What they once meant is gone.

(301, emphasis added)

The odd shift into the present tense in the highlighted phrase, here, signals that the effect of repetition is not simply to bury an expression’s dead usages but also to bring whatever else remains of it into a kind of bare present so that no meaning at all can adhere to it. This negation of the instrumental function of words would seem to be a kind of linguistic reflex to Kelway’s self-annihilating depiction in photographs (“I not only am not but never have been”) and its distortive effect on his sociality (“So much so that it’s extraordinary coming in here with you”). It is also a gesture that draws an important distinction against the constitutive role of Harrison’s

that was that, which ought to be a virtually meaningless tautology but, articulated as it is from an asymmetrical present, does somehow seem to mean something—and to mean even more in its repetition.

In turn, Stella Rodney introduces a more substantial structural symmetry into the linguistic terrain of the novel, one which, like Harrison's, functions constitutively as *asymmetry*—namely, the rhetorical figure of the chiasmus. The narrator describes Stella's distinct temporal orientation as the "'time being' which war has made the very being of time" (109). The inverted syntax is not simply a stylistic flourish; it serves the important task of temporarily removing the idle expression "time being" from scare quotes—of using rhetorical convention to unfasten the present from rhetorical convention. When Stella is in the scene, Bowen's prose (both in narration and in dialogue) tends to crystalize into chiasmic shapes: "I do—do I"; "what then?—then what? "You are, are you?"; or, in a striking exchange between Stella and her son:

"You are looking more like yourself."

"More like myself, am I looking?" (248, 32, 46, 49)

Such moments seem often to be marked with an m-dash rather than a less obvious punctuation mark or conjunction, emphasizing the visual dimension of these little symmetries of thought, the shadow-casting of phrases (rather than their simple repetition) that comes to express Stella's experiential present—which is also, for her, the experience of love, the turning point of the novel as such: "To have turned away from everything to one face is to find oneself face to face with everything" (218).

Given the reflexive force of Stella's temporality, its centering effect, it is fitting that she visits the ancestral home, Mount Morris, in a chapter positioned physically and numerically in

the middle of the novel—much as Stella’s life, “younger by a year or two than the century,” is suspended, now, on the edge of the middle of the century. Her story is a scaled-up version of the suspended intimacy of chapter 1. Just as the novel’s first instance of *suspense* held its sentence in syntactic and syllabic suspension (“Having hung for just that instant more suspended the music now broke with a light crash”), belonging so perfectly to the end of one clause and the beginning of another that it is dislodged from both—so too does chapter 9 (of 17) stand equivocally poised at the novel’s literal and figural center. Stella feels this as an existential crisis of historic—or, rather, historic-futural—proportion: “the fatal connection between the past and the future [had] been broken...It had been Stella, her generation, who had broken the link—what else could it be but its broken edges that she felt grating inside her soul?” (195) Stella’s suffering derives not from tension, but from its phenomenological remnants —from the broken relay between one generation and the next, one form of suspense and another.

Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the rhetorical heavy-handedness that attends Stella’s intricately synchronized layers of in-betweenness, one can detect in the scene at Mount Morris a kind of temporal cross-fading effect, the co-presence of a *now* that is in fact the future. It should be recalled here that Bowen began writing *The Heat of the Day* in 1944 and, though she didn’t complete it until 1948, she kept the war’s terminus largely outside the perspectival framework of the novel so as not to eclipse its sense of middleness with a sense of an ending. Claire Seiler has observed, however, that much of the novel’s formal and thematic emphasis on middles (which she somewhat imprecisely identifies with the figure of *suspension*) is the result of revisions made late in the process of composition. Seiler argues that Bowen had difficulty figuring out how to coordinate the relative eventlessness of the plot of the novel with the events of the war during which it is supposed to occur, and so she (Bowen) ends up defaulting to what is essentially a

postwar idiom—namely, the conceptual fixation on what it means to define an epoch by its middleness, to be “at midcentury,” a figure of speech that was ubiquitous across all sorts of discourses of the time.²⁸

If the actual future is thus secreted in the fictional present here in the form of a “little expression,” a dying metaphor intensified to such an extreme that it threatens to dominate the whole shape of the story, it does not fail to have an apparent effect on Stella, generating what is perhaps the novel’s one distinctly recognizable instance of suspense. When she arrives at the house she finds herself led on by “expectancy rather than memory,” a sense of nervous anticipation that might as well place her in a Gothic horror story as she searches around the dark phantasmagoria of the mansion’s mirrored labyrinth of hallways and bedrooms (184). But, as the caretaker’s daughter leads her to her room, the sensation suddenly ceases—so close to the novel’s literal, physical center that one wonders if it is not precisely so only because of an unavoidable accident of the printing process:

At midday, even, this lobby of many doors at the head of the windowed staircase had been always shadowy: now the doors round her were only to be felt. The suspense, a suspense so long anticipated, in which she waited to hear which handle the child would turn was, now it came *to* the moment, more than half fictitious, after all neither real nor deep. (184)

In the moment suspense enters the novel, it is dismissed as (mostly) fiction. In its repetition and qualification, *the* definite suspense becomes *an* indefinite suspense, which in its stretching-out is downgraded to a simulacrum of suspense: an anticipation of anticipation, “neither real nor deep.” The “gears” of the novel’s “affect machinery” (to borrow again Avanesian and Hennig’s

²⁸ See Claire Seiler, “At Midcentury: Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*,” *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2014): 125-45.

phrase) are thus exposed in the exact center of the novel at the exact instant of the machine's shift into obsolescence. And, in turn, the words *suspense* itself, which has so far been used with considerable emphasis, will not be used again in any form.²⁹

But the effect is not to terminate the narrative. In distinction to the motionlessness of Roderick's moment, its lack of "flutter," Stella's constant chiasmic centering of the *now* suggests that even through a sort of brute formal repetition—through the positional interchanging and interdependence of elements that constitute the indifferent "processes" of the encompassing sense of modernity that threatens her son's existence—one might at least locate a kind of semantic kinesis, a vital narrative reflex—a sign that there might be even more to *that was that* than what Harrison experiences as the self-differentiation of a singular instant. At a crucial juncture in her visit to Mount Morris, Stella muses reflexively on her place in the novel:

That was that—or, could there still be something more? That her own life should be a chapter missing from this book need not mean that the story was at an end.

At a pause it was, but perhaps a pause for the turning point? (194).

This center-point marks the complete distillation of the imperious *now* to its status as a rhetorical figure, a position, a zero point in any number of familiar spatial metaphors for time. This is a "turning" that carries with it all of the figural weight of revolution, of the movement of history, of the rotation of celestial bodies, of the transformation of one generation to the next. For the turn is calibrated to *something happening*—an astonishing moment in a novel of such scant happenings!—to the news unheard by Stella over Mount Morris's broken radio: a major Allied victory in the North African Campaign.

²⁹ This goes as well for *suspension* and its variants.

But for all its momentousness, as it were, this so-called “terrible victory,” the very signal of “the war turning,” is in this context no more and no less than a sort of pun: a turn that turns, a trope that tropes, a fiction of suspendedness suspended in the middle of the middle of nothing (198).³⁰ If there’s a prevailing sense of disappointment about Stella’s temporality, it somehow winds up being Louie’s to bear. In the final pages of the novel, she will reflect on her fleeting acquaintance with Stella and find it impossible to get Harrison off of her mind: “That was that; simply that again. There was nobody to admire: there *was* no alternative” (346, emphasis original).

VIII. “UNEXPECTED-EXPECTED”

Could there still be something more? In her essay, “Rx for a Story Worth the Telling,” Bowen poses the following question: “Suspense may account for the primitive hold on us of a story. But when the end is known, when the suspense evaporates, what then?” As she sets out in the essay to enumerate the forms of suspense, she makes a suggestive elision: “The play on emotional suspense throughout a love story does not need comment” (327).³¹ If her spy thriller works to put this question of the aftereffects of suspense at the center rather than the end of the novel, keeping the minimal generic structures of mystery intact so as to sustain a sort of untense

³⁰ The other significant moment in which the events of war coincide with the events of the novel is also coordinated with puns. In a *breaking* and *smashing* deeply reminiscent of the *breaking* and *crashing* of the musical suspense of chapter 1, an affective involvement with bodies is withheld in the same instant it seems almost to transpire: “That day whose start in darkness covered Robert’s fall or leap from the roof had not yet fully broken when news broke: the Allied landings in North Africa. Talk was of nothing else. Nor had the quickening subsided when Montgomery’s Order of the Day to the Eighth Army—“We have completely smashed the German and Italian armies”—became the order of yet another day for London. There came the Sunday set for victorious bell-ringing: throughout the country every steeple was to break silence” (327)

³¹ Elizabeth Bowen, “Rx for a Story Worth the Telling,” *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

tension, the extent to which the *Heat of the Day* winds up being a love story—a story of unconsummated consummation—does seem to require comment. Does the staging of the evaporation of suspense also entail the evaporation of some “primitive” structure of desire—or of, as Louie might put it, human interest—in the form of the novel, and if so, what then?

Somewhat by surprise, the book ends in the most conventional possible way with a series of conclusions that, in a manner reminiscent of a Jane Austen novel, disclose each character’s romantic fate. Stella is unexpectedly to be married; Harrison, expectedly alone. Louie all of a sudden has a baby—one assumes the father is one of her anonymous human lovers, but the identity is never revealed, so why couldn’t it be the news? And Roderick, who always did have a reciprocal extrahuman attachment to Mount Morris, ends up impregnated by its demesne.³²

The fates of the two women serve the crucial function of placing retroactive emphasis on the extent to which the novel’s senses of suspense have been built less on espionage and intrigue than on a kind of sustained moral ambivalence about the sexual adventures of women living without husbands in wartime London. At one point, while in Harrison’s company, Stella has a vision of her husband, who died years before (after leaving Stella for an older woman who nursed him during the war). For an instant she sees “Roderick’s father’s face, its look suspended and noncommittal,” and wonders, *why now?*:

³² Figures of pregnancy abound in the novel, but Roderick’s is one of the more fascinating ones: “He had come to the humid stoniness of the garden wall, steadied himself on the unequal metaling of the cart tracks, put his hand on gates, struck out a twang from wire, established by touch the vital differing unhumanity of rocks, corrugated iron, tree trunks. He had from all points turned and returned to trace the elusive river-glimmer below him. Dark ate the outlines of the house as it ate the outlines of the hills and drank from the broken distances of the valley. The air had been night itself, re-imprinted by every one of his movements upon his face and hands—and still, now that he was indoors and gone to bed, impregnating every part of the body it had not sensibly touched. He could not sleep during this memory of the air” (351).

One could only suppose that the apparently forgotten beginning of any story was unforgettable; perpetually one was subject to the sense of there having had to be a beginning *somewhere*. Like the lost first sheet of a letter or missing first pages of a book, the beginning kept on suggesting what must have been its nature. One never was out of reach of the power of what had been written first. Call it what you liked, call it a miscarried love, it imparted, or was always ready and liable to impart, the nature of an alternative, attempted recovery or enforced second start to whatever followed. The beginning, in which was conceived the end, could not but continue to shape the middle part of the story, so that none of the realisations along that course were what had been expected, quite whole quite final.

The dead little expression *miscarried love* here activates the punning quality of *conception*, of the “shape [of] the middle” as a familiar figure of *expectancy* and in turn provokes an equivocation in the senses of *suspended commitment* for which the absent father stands (authorial, parental, matrimonial, political, sexual, etc.).

In narrative and in existential terms—that is, in terms of stories and of choices—the novel here conceives of an “alternative” structure of desire, shaped not by a missing end but by a missing beginning—one that is as obscure as it is irrevocable. This stands as an alternative to suspense; it is an experience structured not by knowledge that the end is unknown and *to be realized*, but one structured by the knowledge of a forgotten beginning *realized in the present*. If suspense is typically understood as a mode of expectation—or, in Saint-Amour’s refinement, of expecting the unexpected, of expectancy *in the present* conditioned by unexpectancy *of the future*—then Stella’s absent husband introduces a far stranger experience of unexpectancy *in the present* that is conditioned by expectancy *from the past*, from *what could have been possible*.

What Bowen seems to be describing is a kind of noumenal instant of conception that, in a rather precise inversion of Heidegger's unknowable death, perpetually draws the present out of the future and renders it unexpected, unwhole, unfinal.

Thus the moment in which the terminus of the novel (if that's the right way to put it) coincides with the ending of the war is not figured as an end or destination but rather as the realization of an irrevocable beginning in the scenic and perspectival dissolution of expectation: "The unexpected-expected day, with its feeling of elsewhere-ness, ran its broadcast-echoing course. You could not take back what had been done" (371). The persistent evaporation of suspense, its ongoing removal, cannot simply be described as counter-narrative, as the defeat, say, of *suspense* by *suspension*—or, as Jameson might portray it, as the defeat of the narrative impulse by the eternalization of the present as affect—as if, in some alternate history of the end of realism, "everything now" became impossible rather than possible.³³ Instead, to the extent that the terms of this antithesis remain paronomastically interlinked, there forms a kind of metonymic relay between the human body and the "affect machinery" of fiction. If the perpetuation of the present is supposed to be endemic to late modernity, the mid-point of the front line of an interminable war—of a rhetorical process that severs sense from sensation, exposing words and bodies in mutual dereliction—one finds in Bowen an unexpected point of near-attachment: in the flitting animation of dead usages, of idle talk—in, as it were, the little expressions of little expressions. If the novel doesn't heal wounds, it does put in place a countervailing process that

³³ For Jameson's somewhat perplexing distinction between what he calls the "eternal present" of the body and the "perpetual present" more commonly associated with postmodernism, see especially Chapter 2, "The Twin Sources of Realism: Affect, or, the Body's Present," in *The Antinomies of Realism*. The eternal present is there defined as a kind of continuum of affect, the "chromatism of the body," which Jameson opposes to named emotions or feelings, as such (i.e. fear, joy, anger, etc.) (27-44).

works, with puns more than half intended, to untense the long over-worked joints of realism and reality.

Chapter 2 - Graham Greene, Carol Reed and the Thresholds of Continuity

I. ERRORS OF CONTINUITY

In what I've previously referred to (in admittedly vague terms) as the posthuman thriller, Bowen and others sought, after the war, to establish artistic ground on which to de-psychologize a certain faith in continuity that pervaded late 19th and early 20th century understandings of human experience. This aesthetic territory is claimed in more or less direct opposition to representations of consciousness and self-experience, but its basic forms precede the technological restructuring of our sensibilities with which the term "posthuman" is commonly associated. "I wish I were God," is in *The Heat of the Day* Roderick's way of signaling the trouble as he ponders death and realizes that his person does not endure in any meaningful sense, even as he holds reflexively to a prosthetic hope that "art can go on mattering once it has stopped hurting" (337).¹ His wish does not betray a proselytizing impulse on Bowen's part so much as a strain of decadent cynicism that one can find captured in even harsher terms by Graham Greene's Maurice Bendrix in *The End of the Affair*: "When we get to the end of human beings we have to delude ourselves into a belief in God, like a gourmet who demands more complex sauces with his food" (119).²

The end of human beings is for Bowen marked by a general faltering of the belief in continuity, a belief (which realist fiction was supposed to uphold) that one's self and the characters one encounters in the world persist outside of the perpetual present—the "immense today," in her words—that had encroached on 20th century narrative practices. Her novels chart the phenomenal limits of the presiding faith that experiences link to one another in some

¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002).

² Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (New York: Penguin Classics edition, 2004).

infinitely dense and absolutely indistinct way; what, nearing the end of the 19th century, Bergson most famously called “pure duration”; and what, even now—and even while tracing the death of the realist tradition—Fredric Jameson still seems to find alive in the notion of affect, which he describes as the undifferentiated “chromaticism” of the human body, the “eternity” made possible in the “art of transitions” (38-9).³ For Jameson, the increasing aesthetic dominance of the “eternal present” (as opposed to narrative, or as he also puts it, “destiny”) heralds the end of realism in the same historical movement with which it delimits human consciousness (25). But in the sometimes fraught transposition of Bergson’s qualitative sense of duration forward through the idiom of 20th-century existential phenomenology and into the “impersonal present,” a tenacious sense of continuity seems always to be preserved against the various breaks and inhumanities of modernity: “at its outer limit,” writes Jameson, “affect becomes the organ of perception of the world itself, the vehicle of my-being-in-the-world” (43).

But what endures, exactly, if it is not duration, *per se*? The question is related to the one that frames the previous chapter, beginning with Bowen’s suggestion that memory has a kind of strange externality to it, that sensations are imprinted on things in a manner that is not quite intelligible as an allegory of writing or some other technique of information storage. In this chapter, however, I want to set out a somewhat broader view of a world in which it wasn’t the task of *answering* this question that dominated aesthetic practice so much as that of finding the means to *avoid it*. This view is not meant to be comprehensive but rather to place in question the

³ I refer here to *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2015) in which the discussion of affect is curiously devoid of substantive reference to Bergson. In *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York: Verso, 2009), it is much clearer where Bergson does and does not fit into Jameson’s thinking about time and temporality (see in particular Part VI: “The Valences of History,” 475-612); but here there seems to be a more thoroughgoing attempt to repress Bergson’s vitalism, even as Jameson’s antinomy of “affect” and “named emotion” seems so precisely to rehearse Bergson’s canonic antithesis of qualitative and quantitative multiplicities—at least insofar as naming emotions would seem to amount to the same thing as numbering them.

need or nostalgia for continuity that seems so relentlessly to attach itself (albeit sometimes in clandestine forms) to any such attempts to inch beyond the mind.

Doing so in philosophical terms tends to sound extreme, as in Quentin Meillassoux's speculative realist argument that the only way to get there—to what he calls “the great outdoors”—is to stop believing that there is any reason at all for *anything* to continue, including the laws of physics.⁴ Such a claim sounds extreme in part because it poses a forceful challenge to the structure of belief that underlies the antinomies of continuity and discontinuity that are so frequently counted among the major conflicts of modernity. These are reflected in problems, for instance, of tradition conceived as fidelity to the past; but they extend down to the most fundamental confrontations between, on the one hand, the various forms of positivism that tend to define the intellectual landscape after the turn of the twentieth century and, on the other, enduringly mysterious human things like intuition.

The turns or gestures toward religiosity for 20th-century writers like Bowen and Greene seem to indicate less an answer to the problem of continuity than a way of delimiting its aesthetic frontier. I would speculate that for Bowen this might have been a simple matter of moderation. She and Greene were apparently friends, but she retained a certain Anglo-Irish Protestant condescension toward Catholics partially on the grounds that she found them immoderate in their devoutness, quipping in her memoir *Seven Winters* (1942) that the frequency with which Catholics attend mass seemed to her to reveal “some incontinence of the soul” (508).⁵ Whatever the state of Greene's soul may have been, one can at least say that he was endlessly conflicted

⁴ See in particular “Hume's Problem” in *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 82-111.

⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters* (London: Vintage, 1999)

about how to handle the ends of things in literary terms. “A novel, I used to think, has to end somewhere,” says the fictional novelist Bendrix in *The End of the Affair*,

but I’m beginning to believe that my realism has been at fault all these years, for nothing in life now ever seems to end. Chemists tell you that matter is never completely destroyed, and mathematicians tell you that if you halve each pace crossing a room, you will never reach the opposite wall, so what an optimist I would be if I thought that this story ended here (121).

The story referred to reflexively here is that of his affair with a married woman, Sarah Miles, set in London during World War II. The infidelity fails adequately to end when Bendrix fails miraculously to die after a V-1 flying bomb destroys the flat in which the two lovers carry on their sexual liaison. In linking a positivist injunction to believe in continuity with a religious one to believe in miracles, Bendrix’s pessimistic renunciation of finitude comes off as a sort of untimely and grotesque Bergsonism, taking the Zeno-like paradox not as a challenge to the notion of continuity itself but rather as bleak evidence of the unending process of creative evolution.

The passage indicates some of the ways in which Greene appears not just as a troubled—and troubling—outlier in a time of widespread secularization but also as an outlier in an era commonly defined by a sense that time (for humans at least) was limited. Regardless of the extent to which one reads Bendrix’s troubles as proxy for Greene’s own ideas about faith, the novel reveals how concerned Greene was at this time with the difficulty of conceiving a fiction of infidelity in the context of a world burdened with a general excess of faithfulness—a world, that is, where things just seem to go on as they always have been despite all manner of destruction and devastation. Thus, a basic premise of the following chapter is that the question of

whether Greene was a Catholic novelist or (as he famously demurred) a novelist who happened to be Catholic, is less significant for literary history and its philosophical upheavals than what his work as a novelist and screenwriter indicates more fundamentally about shifting conceptions of fidelity in the postwar years and how these relate to the problems of temporality that shape the aesthetic developments of the period.

In his autobiographical work, *Ways of Escape*, Greene shares an anecdote in which, during the production of *The Third Man* (1949), David O. Selznick takes him and Carol Reed to task for apparent continuity problems in the film's script. Foremost, Selznick found it implausible that Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton) would waste his time sticking around in Vienna after discovering within minutes of his arrival that his only reason for being there—a visit with his friend Harry Lime (Orson Welles)—had been undermined by Lime's sudden death. Greene's answer is that Martins promptly falls in love with Lime's former lover, Anna Schmidt (Alida Valli); in other words, he hopes he might continue on where Lime left off (66).⁶ Thus, the film's most basic element of suspense, its reason not to end, is built up largely around the question of whether or not Anna will remain faithful to her lover after he's dead and what it might mean if she doesn't—or much worse, as it turns out, if he (like Bendrix after him) continues to live.

Greene clearly recognized the formal implications of such complicated presumptions, disruptions and resumptions of continuity. On this point, he holds his tongue to Selznick but feels a certain ambivalence. He concedes that there might have been some “grim reason” justifying Selznick's criticism, but he also adds the following parenthetical reflection: “I would forget momentarily the lesson which I had learned as a film critic—that...continuity is often the enemy of life”; adding, with an obscure reference to Jean Cocteau, that “mistakes of continuity

⁶ Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: Vintage, 1999).

belong to the unconscious poetry of a film” (66). It is difficult to understand just what he might have meant by this. It is at least clear that the problem of continuity exceeds the aesthetic concerns of filmmaking, assuming an ethical dimension that is somewhat counterintuitive on the surface—especially coming from someone whose work bears so little trace of an avant-garde impulse towards narrative disruption. In what sense are life and continuity opposed? This is not framed as a mimetic problem, *per se*, but what could the art of the continuity error actually look like? The question bears a deeper paradox, which the notion of an “unconscious poetry” cannot quite dispel: once admitted as part of the art, wouldn’t the error promptly cease to be in error and thus fall, through its *own* “grim reason,” into the hands of the enemy?

One can find a hint of an answer just in the way that, by raising the point, Greene marks a distinction between his literary persona in the autobiographical *Ways of Escape* and the nearly forgotten version of himself that had been a film critic for many years. The implication, perhaps, is that there is something uniquely contingent about the process of shooting a motion picture that might preempt the complete habituation of editorial discontinuities. But this is undercut (unconsciously, no doubt) by the deferral to the language of psychoanalysis, which works to explain such contingencies away.

To remain more firmly on *this* side of the threshold of continuity, then, would seem at once the most basic and the most impossible object of Greene’s postwar work. This chapter will show how that impossibility is most fully realized in his cinematic collaborations with Carol Reed after World War II (*The Third Man* (1949) and *The Fallen Idol* (1948)); but it will consider some of his fiction as well. In particular, I will show how the strange narrational situation of Greene’s story “The Basement Room,” on which *The Fallen Idol* was based, thwarts one of the most basic functions of narrative fiction: the tireless task of trying to account for how the

experiences of childhood are supposed to be connected to those of adulthood. While the story places this disarmingly familiar experience of self-persistence in doubt, the adaptation reveals even more sharply the devastations wrought by its faithful restoration.

To an extent, it does make sense to uphold a practical distinction between Greene the novelist and Greene the screenwriter, since cinematic production requires a more clearly defined set of rules for managing continuity than those which novelists can more or less invent as they go along. But of greater concern here is how medium-specific demands for continuity are subsumed into a broader re-conception of fidelity, as such, in an art that absconds to the fringes of perception—not to draw out the relations of things, as Henry James might have put it, but to insist on their dissolution. Such a practice appears to correspond to Greene’s famous fascination with “dangerous edges,” with the literal and figurative borderlands, frontiers and zones of conflict that set much of his life and work. It appears, as well, to maintain his frequently quoted assessment of himself as a novelist of “the narrow boundary between loyalty and disloyalty, between fidelity and infidelity, the mind's contradictions, the paradox one carries within oneself” (21).⁷ Yet the fiction of infidelity, in its very persistence, carries with it a different sort of paradox, a more discomfiting suggestion that in practice such boundaries cannot be adequately

⁷ This is from a conversation with Marie-Francoise Allain, published in *The Other Man*. The phrase “dangerous edge” comes from Robert Browning’s “Bishop Blougram's Apology.” Greene recommends the passage as an epigraph for his novels:

“Our interest’s on the dangerous edge of things.
The honest thief, the tender murderer,
The superstitious atheist, demirep
That loves and saves her soul in new French books—
We watch while these in equilibrium keep
The giddy line midway.” (quoted in *The Other Man*, 21)

The extent to which this recommendation has been faithfully followed is evident just in the number of books and articles on Greene’s work that take the phrase for a title.

marked at all—that the writing of the ends of affairs, as it were, finds only that there aren’t any such ends to speak of.

II. GREENE, BOWEN, AND “THE DARK BACKWARD”

Insofar as problems of continuity tend to work their way into the literary domain specifically in psychological terms, it seems hard to overstate the influence of William James. Greene, along with some of the other artists and writers in question in this project, might best be understood as setting up a confrontation with—or at least holding in relief—James’ radical empiricism and its lasting effects on the formal development of the novel throughout the 20th century. In James’ “world of pure experience,” the domain of experience is vastly expanded to include “the relations that connect experiences” (22).⁸ Connections between things are in this view no less than things themselves; distinct objects of perception are thus drawn into the vague, undifferentiated flux of their relations to other objects, to a horizon of things almost-but-not-quite perceived—what Edmund Husserl (with recourse to James) will later call a “halo of background-intuitions” (70).⁹ Not only did such ideas provide philosophical justification for various mimetic experiments in art and literature, they helped establish the foundations of phenomenology that would exert decades of influence on the course of European literary and aesthetic theory from Heidegger forward.¹⁰ But by the postwar period, despite the popular

⁸ William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

⁹ This particular figure shows up in the first book of Husserl’s *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, translated by F. Kersten (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983). This conception of the “halo” or “background” of direct perception is important to the development in Husserl’s phenomenology of the intentional character of perception, which acts to *seize* or *pick out* objects from their experiential context, something which before him James would describe as an inarticulable “feeling of tendency.”

¹⁰ It bears remarking that, while the influence of phenomenology on European literary *theory* can be taken for granted almost as readily as the influence of William James’ writings about consciousness on literary *practice* in the 20th century, less has been studied of the direct mutual influence of American pragmatism

influence of figures like Sartre and Camus, the deeper currents of existentialist thought also provided a great source of artistic anxiety. Bowen, for instance, felt that James Joyce's prose had "infected" Europe with the stream of consciousness, which is to suggest that the lasting formal and psychological manifestations of James' brand of empiricism are a disease of consciousness itself and that literary style was not the source but rather a carrier (247).¹¹

Graham Greene appears to have gone a good deal further in linking literary practice to a general sense that the domain of perception and self-experience had undergone a devastating expansion—even as he sought to trivialize the popular debate about the stream of consciousness technique, which crops up as an unexpected but insistent object of parody in both the novel and the film versions of *The Third Man*. I will return to these moments in the subsequent discussion of the film; but, for now, a clearer picture of the philosophical stakes of Greene's work can be found in his 1935 essay "A Footnote: The Dark Backward." In it, he refers to Henry James' preface to *Portrait of a Lady* in outlining what he calls the "eternal time-question" that every novelist must face and that none, including Henry James, can answer. Greene quotes James quoting *The Tempest*:

"This eternal time-question is...for the novelist always there and always formidable; always insisting on the *effect* of the great laps and passage, of the 'dark backward and abysm,' by the terms of truth, and on the effect of

and the European philosophical traditions during the intellectual upheavals of the period. For a collection of recent approaches to this topic, see the *Pragmatism and the European Traditions: Encounters with Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology Before the Great Divide*, edited by Maria Baghramian and Sarin Marchetti (New York: Routledge, 2018). For a historical account of, in particular, the influence of James' discussions of the "halo" or "fringe" of perception on Husserlian phenomenology, see in this same volume, Dermot Moran, "Phenomenology and Pragmatism: Two Interactions. From Horizontal Intentionality to Practical Coping" (269-87).

¹¹ Elizabeth Bowen, "James Joyce," *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

compression, of composition and form, by the terms of literary arrangement. It is really a business to terrify all but stout hearts.” (55, emphasis original)¹²

Put simply, the problem (as Greene sees it) lies in ascribing anteriority to characters—in conveying the impression that each character’s life extends beyond the discrete portions of it which comprise the material of the novel. Though this seems like a benign technical issue of plotting and characterization, say, or the balance between narration and description, it gives way to a chasm of artistic failure: the constitutive discontinuities of novelistic style, inevitable as these may be, are markers of personal defectiveness on the part of the novelist. Greene implies that all of the various techniques of fiction-writing present nothing but an index of inadequacy, so that even the *length* of novels—their physical distention, and indeed their very *being*—is the result of their inherent vacuity, of the “dark backward” that separates this moment from that and divides the pure experience of time, as it were, into the dismal multiplicities of spatial representation (55-7).

Greene believed—or seems very much to have wanted to believe—that Elizabeth Bowen worked to make peace with this particular crisis of modern storytelling by developing in her characters an “inhuman intuition” (which he opposes to Henry James’ “inhuman intelligence”), a post-Bergsonian sleight of hand that enables them to seem to sympathize with one another despite the fact that none of them appear as integrated selves. Rather than attempting to overcome inadequacy, Bowen (according to Greene) freely allows it, making “capital out of the gap in the records.” Greene cites *The House in Paris* (1935), but by the time Bowen writes *The Heat of the Day* (1949), the skeptical impressionism that he attributes to her prose seems, despite any admissions of inadequacy, to be as questionable an artistic practice as it is a method of

¹² Graham Greene, “The Dark Backward,” *Collected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2014).

intuition.¹³ Take, for instance, the relations that connect the experiences, so to speak, of Stella Rodney and Harrison¹⁴:

That, of course, was the core of their absolute inhumanity together. His concentration on her was made more oppressive by his failure to have or let her give him any possible place in the human scene. By the rules of fiction, with which life to be credible must comply, he was as a character “impossible”—each time they met, for instance, he showed no shred or trace of having been continuous since they last met. His civilian clothes, though one could be remotely conscious of alternation in suit or shirt or tie, *seemed* to vary much less than Robert's uniform; the uninterestingly right state of what he wore seemed less to argue care—brushing, pressing, changes of linen—than a physical going into abeyance, just as he was, with everything he had on him, between appearances. “Appearance,” in the sense used for a ghost or actor, had, indeed, been each of these times the word. Coming out of that vacuum, the reiterated unrelated story of his desire could but be unmeaning. Just now, for an instant, for the first time, in the darkness in which she could not even remember the colour of his coat, he had been for the first time palpably *someone* near her: a being—continuous, secretive, dense, weighty, locked in himself and face to face, beside her, with the unbounded night in which no clock struck. (155)

¹³ In the same essay, Greene associates Bowen's technique with the more canonic literary impressionism of Joseph Conrad and Ford Maddox Ford. He sees Ford's time-shift strategy as the most successful of all novelistic failures since *Tristram Shandy* to “express the passage of time directly” (59).

¹⁴ To briefly recall the plot of the novel: in the setting of wartime London, Harrison seeks to compel the widow Stella Rodney into a sexual relationship with him under the uncertain threat that he is a counter-intelligence agent and is holding out evidence that would implicate Stella's lover, Robert Kelway, as a Nazi informant.

The passage is not entirely ironic in trying to insist that it is life that threatens to be unfaithful to fiction and not the other way around. Its capital—or, rather, “credit”—lies in the move to *discredit* the extreme empiric presumption that Harrison can *be* only insofar as he *appears* over and over again. It tries earnestly to imagine how desire, meaning, novelty, or anything one might call an event, can possibly be compatible with the mechanical repetition of successive *nows* across which Harrison’s character fails adequately to transpire. Belying the performative inadequacy that Greene describes, however, this prose stands out for its discursive clarity, its pseudo-philosophical tone; and rather than relying on the *ex machina* of extra-human intuition, it quite explicitly retains an existential notion of humanness that precedes the forms of intuition—a kind of primordial continuity that eludes perception, memory and even time but that is no less immanent for doing so.

I don’t point out these contradictions simply to quibble with Greene’s reading of Bowen, but rather to draw attention to the broader set of presumptions that underlie it, which both writers bring to bear in different ways. In retrospect, these seem familiar as presentiments of deconstruction: they reveal an acute concern about the temporalization of language and of writing, and about whether the stories through which self-experiences are constituted have somehow lost fidelity to an external reality—to the “human scene.” But, of course, retroactive assertions of prefiguration are always dubious.

Bowen, at any rate, did not need to have read Derrida (who was just beginning his studies in Paris the year she published *The Heat of the Day*) to notice, for instance, that puns signal moments of linguistic infidelity (as I suggest in chapter 1). And to put it this way is not itself a mere pun. I hesitate too bluntly to historicize a postwar punning phenomenon, since puns seem no less common in Middle English poetry than in modernism (and maybe everywhere else in

literary history); but the clarity with which, in *The Heat of the Day*, wordplay becomes thematized as an activity intimately connected to acts of betrayal certainly stands out.

As I argued previously, the novel's central act of disloyalty is motivated by a linguistic rather than a psychological process: Stella's lover Robert Kelway justifies his cooperation with the Nazis by mechanically repeating the word "betray" with the hope of rendering it senseless, of making "dead currency" of it. The novel itself enacts a similar procedure with its many senses of *suspense*—but, crucially, such terms prove insatiable in their paronomastic potency. These are not the puns of James Joyce; they do not play lightly with association, running free through the branching tributaries of sound and thought. Instead, there is a startling and grotesque urgency with which the clichés and dead metaphors of the language of love, having once deserted the body, rejoin it in the novel's scenes of suspended intimacy. As words and things awkwardly form and re-form correspondences, as *lips* cleave to lips and *joints* untense—as the "daily build-up" of newsprint, even when disposed in the wrapping of fish, is no less the stuff of sexual climax—the novel leaves one with the paradoxical sense that the unease with which such words and phrases are brought to life, so to speak, actually *increases* in proportion to the stubbornness with which they refuse to fall into obsolescence, to be repurposed, to desert some basic or more original form of livingness. They continue to raise dust in the mind, as Kelway understates it.

Insofar as the novel's process of semantic satiation allegorizes the linguistic perils of modernity, its failure plays in reverse the history, now taken widely and often mournfully for granted, of the reduction of language to its contingencies. The process fails, that is, in total disregard for the conditions by which reality was supposed to have been arrogated to the mere effects or signals of reality, as Barthes' memorably formulated it.¹⁵ Such writing contradicts

¹⁵ Roland Barthes, "L'effet de réel." *Communications*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1968): 84–89.

what Jameson has more recently called the “autonomization” of affect, through which bodies and literary figuration are severed from one another as the antimonies of realism eventually bring about its generic collapse (36-7).¹⁶ One can find very few signs here of these breakdowns of correspondence. Indeed, Bowen depicts a world in which one might actually *hope* (in sympathy with Kelway) that words and phrases, as well as larger units of literary practice—images, bits of rhetoric, incipient symbols, metaphors and allegories, or even long segments of narrative—would stop so relentlessly and so meaningfully attaching to things, especially bodily things.

Such concerns are not unique to Bowen. There is an almost unbearable horror for instance when, in Greene’s *The Heart of The Matter* (1948), Scobie returns home after his day’s work as a police commissioner in coastal West Africa, walks upstairs, sees his wife on her bed under a mosquito net, and is struck by the sudden “impression of a joint under a meat cover”—a “cruel image” that needs to be “hustled away” in terms that are despairingly literal (14).¹⁷ As I will show in a somewhat different light in chapter 3, it is just such undead correspondences that are thoroughly naturalized in Raymond Chandler’s remarkable similes. In Greene they remain a monstrosity—a horror of metonymy that is never more keenly felt than by the wife of the plantation owner Fellows in *The Power and the Glory* (1940), who lives in a perpetual state of linguistic terror that perpetuates her fear of death:

The word ‘life’ was taboo: it reminded you of death. She turned her face away from [Fowler] towards the wall and then hopelessly back again—the phrase ‘to

¹⁶ I do not want imply that Jameson betrays a nostalgia for these particular forms of correspondence. In fact, it is precisely his goal in *The Antinomies of Realism* to develop a concept of affective continuity that is emancipated from the structuring effects of language (but that is also somehow “impersonal”). Even the most technically refined impressionism would be for Jameson antithetical to the temporality of affect, to the “sliding scale of the incremental” (42). Bowen’s prose stakes itself against exactly this sort of modernist refinement—though, if Greene’s impressions of her work tend to stick, this has proved a risky position.

¹⁷ Graham Greene, *The Heart of the Matter* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004).

the wall' was taboo too. She lay panic-stricken, while the boundaries of her fear widened to include every relationship and the whole world of inanimate things: it was like an infection. You could look at nothing for long without becoming aware that it too carried the germ. (40)¹⁸

Even without psychoanalyzing Greene's misreading—or, rather, preemptive reading—of Bowen as a literary act of repression, one can at least remark that in it he laments the impossibility of Henry James's realism in much the same dolorous spirit as, say, Nietzsche mourned the death of Greek tragedy as having been brought about by the aesthetic triumphs of the principle of division and individuation—but this ends up having the ironic effect of rendering the dark, gaping background to human intuition *even darker*, as though this were the goal all along. In other words, Greene seeks an art form capable of overdramatizing its failures as a way of placing the background beside the foreground, of making the “gaps in the record” part of the record; but in effect this pursuit only expands the “continuous, secretive, dense, weighty” and “unbound” darkness for which it more profoundly fails to account—but which, unwaveringly, it takes on faith to be there still.

Bowen seems to have been more willing to grant that there aren't necessarily gaps, *per se*; that whatever it is that subtends things as they appear cannot be separated from them, and thus—if one follows the logic towards its gloomier implications—infections of consciousness would be thoroughgoing. This is a distinction that William James (more optimistically) took pains to clarify, even, as it seems, he might almost have failed to make it himself:

Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of

¹⁸ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1991).

whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it,—or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh. (16-17, emphasis added)¹⁹

Yet the adjustment, the quick re-fusing of the image to its background (which is somehow both a shadow and a light), requires that time run backward to its prelapsarian moment—because of course Eve was not fused *into* the flesh and bones of Adam’s body but rather separated out from him—and so in its correction, here at least, the original continuity error is seen to generate another.

III. CHILDHOOD AND THE ACCIDENTAL FUTURE: *THE FALLEN IDOL*

I turn now to the more practical, if also somewhat more difficult, task of discussing the art of the continuity error as though it were actually an art. One difficulty, which I will address in more detail subsequently, derives from the fact that any argument along these lines must (at least implicitly) navigate a sometimes divisive set of questions about authorship and intentionality. This is especially true in the case of Greene’s later work as both novelist and screenwriter, since it tends to be pretty deeply bound up with the critical-historical irony of the circumstances that saw the development of auteurism in film studies coincide with the “death of the author” in literary and cultural studies.²⁰ So it seems necessary to remark up front that the object of the following analysis is neither to undercut the auratic qualities of cinema by emphasizing the

¹⁹ William James, “On Some Omissions of Introspective Psychology,” *Mind*, Vol. 9 No. 33 (Jan, 1884), 1-26.

²⁰ For an overview of the institutional history of auteurism as it bears on the critical reception of Greene in the postwar period, see Brian Lindsay Thomson, *Graham Greene and the Politics of Popular Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), especially “Part III: From Author to Contested Authority,” 117-52.

medial contingencies of the form; nor, in dwelling on such contingencies, is it the goal to subsume them into a secret, over-determined authorial purpose. The first example, here, is a breach of continuity in *The Fallen Idol* (Greene and Reed's first collaboration) that should serve neither of these ends because it seems more like a literary effect than a cinematic one—a suggestive narrative anomaly rather than something that a fastidious contributor to the website IMDB.com might point out as a “goof.” Though the irregularity is not exactly obvious, it nevertheless constitutes the film's most significant narrative gambit and establishes its basic structure of suspense.²¹

The narrative of *The Fallen Idol*, which invites comparison to Henry James' *What Masie Knew* (1897), is ostensibly focalized through the point of view of a young child witnessing the foreboding progress of an adulterous affair and its proliferating deceptions. Phillipe (Bobby Henrey) is the son of a diplomat living in an embassy in Belgravia and has been left temporarily in the care of the butler, Baines (Ralph Richardson), and his wife (Sonia Dresdel). Phillipe admires Baines as a paternal figure, though he comes almost-but-not-quite to understand that Baines is having an affair with a woman named Julie (Michèle Morgan), who works at the embassy. When Mrs. Baines ends up dead, Phillipe believes that Baines has murdered her and so, as the police investigate, he must contend with a crisis of loyalty: tell the truth (as he sees it) or betray his friend. His belief in the butler's guilt is false, as it happens, but well founded. While peering in from a staircase on the exterior of the building, Phillipe sees Mr. and Mrs. Baines in a physical altercation at the top of an interior staircase (figure 2.1). As the boy descends to the next floor down, he is blind to what transpires inside, but arrives at a second window at the bottom of *his* staircase just in time to see Mrs. Baines fall dead, with a thud, at the bottom of *hers* (figure

²¹ *The Fallen Idol*, Carol Reed et al., dvd (New York: Criterion Collection, 2006).

2.2). He infers quite reasonably that Baines has pushed her—a conclusion supported by the fact that Baines has (untruthfully) bragged to him in the past about “killing a man in Africa.”



Figure 2.1: Phillipe's view from the top.



Figure 2.2: Phillipe's view from the bottom.

What actually happens, which Reed allows us immediately to see, is far less plausible: once out of the boy's view, Baines quickly steps into another room while his wife remains alone and intact at the top of the stairs. She then attempts to climb out of a high window to reach a balcony from which she hopes she can catch the lovers out, whence she slips and falls to her accidental death at the exact moment that Phillipe looks in again from the window below. The gap in Phillipe's record is only a few seconds, but it is of course decisive, and all of the subsequent narrative and ethical developments of the film follow directly from it. Crucially, this turning point is marked by the almost unnoticeable fact that it has been brought about by a break in the film's otherwise unbroken strategy of narratorial focalization—an “error” of continuity that is carefully orchestrated to appear seamless. Unlike in *What Masie Knows*, we suddenly know a little bit more than what Phillipe knows, and this discrepancy organizes the suspense of the rest of the film. This works on something like the Hitchcockian model, since it is a game based on epistemological manipulation and structural irony; but the more earnest nature of its ethical suspense derives not from the viewers' anticipation of what *will happen* but, rather, from

a sustained doubt about whether what *already has* will be adequately incorporated as the empirical basis upon which each of the disrupted forms of relation—marital, paternal, and legal—might be reconstituted in good faith.²²

Greene's "The Basement Room" (1936), from which the film was adapted, is also remarkable for its own epistemological breaching effect, a slight temporal fracture in the narration that alters its entire ethical and psychological structure. The story is told in the third person in what seems to be the standard past tense of literary retrospection—and, as in the film, knowledge is restricted to the child's point of view. This, however, is violated by three brief proleptic slips. The first occurs when the boy (named, in the story, Philip rather than Phillipe) peers through the window of a café and sees Baines engaged in what the reader can recognize as a surreptitious date. The child, however, cannot quite recognize the transgression, since he is unable to reconcile it with his standing impression of Baines. As it turns out, this particular thwarted apperception will, in startlingly decisive terms, determine the entire course of Philip's life from that moment on:

Baines was urging, hoping, entreating, commanding, and the girl looked at the tea and the china pots and cried...The two brains battled over the tea-cups loving each other, and there came to Philip outside, beyond the ham and wasps and dusty Pimlico pane, a confused indication of the struggle.

He was inquisitive and didn't understand and he wanted to know. He went and stood in the doorway to see better, he was less sheltered than he had ever

²² Along these lines, the film's method of focalization can also be seen as part of a broader trend in cinema and literature of the late 40s addressing the problems of rebuilding the structures of family life after the war. Peter William Evans observes that, though childhood was a "convenient focus for reflection on the loss of pre-1939 innocence in the crucible of war, and the promise of renewal symbolized by child-centered narratives," *The Fallen Idol* in effect betrays this promise with an "arbitrary ending providing no solution to the problems of a deprived child" (83).

been; other people's lives for the first time touched and pressed and moulded. He would never escape that scene. In a week he had forgotten it, but it conditioned his career, the long austerity of his life; when he was dying, rich and alone, it was said that he asked: "Who is she?" (112)²³

The sudden and peculiar dislocation of the narrative voice as it careers into the future is held in relief against the confused aggregation of timeless perceptions that comprise the boy's point of view ("and the girl," "and the china pots," and "the ham and wasps and dusty Pimlico," etc.). It is tempting to read this scene as a fairly conventional set-up for a child's lost innocence on the model of a 19th-century novel, or of childhood trauma on the model of 20th-century popular psychology.²⁴ But in fact the boy seems to remain eternally ignorant, and Greene's narrator is careful here *not* to concern itself with his experience, *per se*—with what happens *to* him or *in* him—but works instead to subsume the child's sensations into a much more expansive human

²³ Graham Greene, "The Basement Room," *Complete Short Stories*, New York: Penguin, 2005).

²⁴ And indeed a few critics and commentators have done so; although, given that there have been decades of sustained scholarship on both the film and the novel versions of *The Third Man* and that the *Fallen Idol* has at least the colloquial status of being one of the *other* masterpieces of British cinema of the postwar era, there is a rather surprising dearth of criticism focused on the film or its literary source—and almost none on the relationship between the two. The critical temptation offered, here, however, would resonate with the general approach to childhood in Greene scholarship, which tends to center on the theme of lost innocence in its variety of religious and secular senses. Greene himself seems to have inaugurated this tradition in 1947 in his autobiographical essay, "The Lost Childhood," when he cites lines from AE's "Germinal" on "the lost boyhood of Judas" and describes himself learning to read for the first time as "the moment when life took a new slant in its journey towards death" (*Collected Essays*, 18, 13). In one early essay on the story and film considered together, Ana Laura Zambrano follows Greene's lead in reading "The Basement Room" as a study of the "formative" pressures of childhood and of the corruptions of socialization—though she suggests that in the film these themes are subordinated to the epistemological concerns of the detective genre (324-31). See "Greene's Visions of Childhood: 'The Basement Room' and The Fallen Idol," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 2 no. 4 (1974). I will address David Lodge's more recent comments on the adaptation subsequently; but for a more general discussions along these lines, see for instance Peter Hollindale, "Innocence and Experience: The Condition of Childhood in Graham Greene's Fiction," *Dangerous Edges of Graham Greene: Journeys with Saints and Sinners*, ed. Dermot Gilvary and Darren J.N. Middleton (New York: Continuum, 2011): 79-96, which argues that childhood, figured as a "condition," is ubiquitous in Greene's work even though his novels rarely feature actual children.

scene, exposing him to a strange exteriorization of experience in which “brains” are seen almost literally to converge. “Other people’s lives” “touch” and “press” and “mould”—doing so in a way that lacks the expected object (i.e. *him*) that should make these actions transitive. Philip cannot escape the scene, in other words, not because it deeply impresses him somehow, but because it stages the conditions of perception and memory in general. Even the idiom of narrative recollection itself dissolves in the empty (if rather insistently anapestic) form of its temporalization: “it was said that he asked: ‘Who is she?’”

The next proleptic slip goes just far enough further to encompass Philip’s death as well. Mrs. Baines—who is domineering, cruel and frightening to the boy before she dies—offers him a toy (specifically a 2A Meccano construction set) in hopes of buying his loyalty, which he refuses:

He never opened his Meccanno set again, never built anything, never created anything, died the old dilettante, sixty years later with nothing to show rather than preserve the memory of Mrs Baines’s malicious voice saying good night, her soft determined footfalls on the stairs to the basement, going down, going down. (116)

Philip’s career, then, is not built up out of the recollected events of his life, as literary careers typically are. Instead, the events of his childhood negate his career as such, and what is preserved in narrative form includes as if by accident the one memory among all the others that most absolutely cannot be his own.

The novelist and critic David Lodge is, as far as I know, the first to point out the peculiarity of the temporal framework of “The Basement Room” with an eye towards its implications for the film adaptation. Lodge considers the story’s prolepsis to be an “authorial

mistake” that produces a “puzzle,” which the film cannot solve and so must correct (275).²⁵ Lodge’s contention is that “in describing Philip on his deathbed, 60 years after the main action, [Greene’s] narrator is not prophesying but reporting” events. But, he continues, “since the story was first published in 1936, the character cannot have died at a later date.” It must follow that these events took place in the 1870s and are therefore riddled with anachronisms (cars and airplanes and other 20th-century things). This interpretation, however, seems to me to be less accountable than the temporal anomaly and doubling-effect that it purports to uncover—especially coming from a novelist. The story’s flash-forwards are first of all too insistent to be formally accidental; and, in fact, the third prolepsis comes in the very last sentence and so is designed to leave a clear final impression of the story’s chronological framework. But this interpretation is perplexing just on its surface for its author’s unexplained refusal to imagine that the temporal intrusions project the *narrator* sixty years out instead of retrojecting the *narrative* sixty years back. Why should a fictional future be unreportable?

It is hard to say whether Lodge’s chronologic predisposition here derives from an unconscious fidelity to certain 19th-century storytelling conventions; but the uncanniness he detects does help to reveal something of the two-timing nature of 20th-century narrative practice, which usually goes unnoticed. One recent approach to this type of doubling effect can be found in Mark Currie’s suggestive argument that contemporary fiction has come to adhere more closely to the temporal logic of the future perfect tense than to that of the past tense typically presupposed for it. As opposed to reporting what *has happened* in the past or prophesizing what *will happen* in the future, the temporal situation of narrative fiction—the “the tense for our times,” as Currie puts it—orients readers towards a future imagined *already to have happened*.

²⁵ David Lodge, “*The Fallen Idol*: from Story to Screen,” *Studies in Victorian Literature*, edited by William Baker (Lanham, Maryland: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015), 275-81.

As an early example (if not a prophesy) of this narratorial trend, Greene's prose does not adopt the future perfect tense in its sentence structure, but its jarring prolepses have the effect of redirecting a story that might otherwise have turned toward the streams of modernist psychologism instead toward what Currie describes as the "flow of unforeseeable novelty," which is structured by a "doubling of temporal perspective, of what will happen with what has already taken place" (5).²⁶

This idea expands on a more restricted narratological approach to prolepsis or the conventional flashforward by promoting it to an existential condition, "connect[ing] the temporality of reading with the temporality of living" by adopting the Heideggerian view that lived experience is structured in a fundamental way through the "anticipation of retrospection" (31).²⁷ For Currie, the conventional temporal logic of past tense narration, in its process of rendering a fictional past as present in the time of reading, also has the (potentially deleterious) effect of training readers to think of the present of lived experience in terms of how it will be looked back on. We take our cue from the grammar of fiction when, for instance, we record a video of our visual experience with the expectation that it will become the object of future reminiscence—or more profoundly when we do things like travel to unfamiliar countries specifically for the sake of looking back on what will have happened there and sharing stories. In this way, we come to experience and understand the present in terms of how we expect it might be recounted in the past tense. To some extent, Currie sees this hermeneutic feedback loop as a schizophrenic process that, exacerbated by technological modernity, "robs" or "deprives" the

²⁶ Mark Currie, *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013)

²⁷ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007)

present of some of its presentness, encouraging us to live in the preterite and so in a perpetual state of “temporal self-distance” (30, 49).

One can read “The Basement Room” as attempting to press this form of self-difference to its breaking point such that the two times of the story fail, in an unexpected way, to form an identity. The assumed present of its events are not recorded as future memories; the adult Philip and the dead Philip—unlike Baines and his dead wife—make no narrative claims on the boy’s allegiance; and thus the “inquisitive” child, who at first “didn’t understand and...wanted to know” winds up defined not retrospectively by what he *does* come to understand but, alternately, against all that he does not and cannot ever presume to anticipate (112).

If this sounds somewhat bleak, it in fact suggests a fantasy of discontinuity, a non-suicidal alternative to self-persistence, that seems optimistic compared to the somewhat more typical existential situation in Greene, wherein characters are bound to recollectable childhoods rather than cut loose from futures known in advance—so that the dreaded but inexorable decades-long block of adulthood cannot be recorded as a gap. The most famous case is probably the villainous man-child Pinkie of *Brighton Rock* (1938), who is endlessly haunted by recollections of the moanings of parental copulation. In *The Power and the Glory* (1940), Captain Fellows fears (in a way that Philip never knows enough to fear about himself) that his daughter will be drawn into the future through a certain inevitable instant of experience—and that this will be the result of an accident, an arbitrary signal amid the aggregate of childhood perceptions: “But at any moment now a word, a gesture, the most trivial act might be her sesame—to what?...You cannot control what you love—you watch it driving recklessly towards the broken bridge, the torn-up track, the horror of seventy years ahead” (38).

It is perhaps never clearer than in moments like this why Greene might have declared continuity “the enemy of life”; in moments, that is, when any imaginable figure of discontinuity—the gap in the record, the broken bridge, the torn up track, the turn to the wall—only extends death itself out until it is found to be in perfect continuity with life. For that sixty or seventy year block of adulthood tends to comprise for Greene a period of “fossilization” (to borrow Sarah Miles’ term from *The End of the Affair*), a process in which habits slowly take over everything that moves until, when no more change is possible, death endures as a kind of distillation of experience, the final shape of a life that has no end but only the “effect of an immense permanence” (*The Power and the Glory*, 44).²⁸

If this is sometimes Greene’s way of indicating eternity—as a continuity effect—then the sense of the absolute that it conveys doesn’t seem to adhere to a conventional Christian theology: “It needs a God outside time,” as Bendrix puts it in *The End of the Affair*, “to remember when everything changes” (119). This makes divinity out to be necessary only as a record of inconstancy. Situated in the “great outdoors” (to borrow again Meillassoux’s phrase), it exits in absolute non-correlation to human temporality and our fossil record, but it also counterposes itself against an Augustinian (and maybe even Jamesonian) notion of eternal presence: neither an “immense permanence” nor an artist of transitions, it would simply be a document of the world’s infidelities.²⁹

²⁸ Even Pinkie is mercifully spared this particular static endlessness—the endlessness, one might say, of the definite image—as he tries for the threshold: “He was at the edge, he was over: they couldn’t even hear a splash. It was as if he’d been withdrawn suddenly by a hand out of any existence—past or present, whipped away into zero—nothing” (264). Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004)

²⁹ Such documentation would be structurally similar to duration in the Bergsonian sense, but with human life and consciousness somehow subtracted—and without a liberating notion of “openness.” As Deleuze points out in *Cinema 1*, one of Bergson’s major innovations was to conceive of duration as “the whole of relations”—as continuous, indivisible change—rather than as the static form of eternity in the classical sense. Deleuze quotes from *Matter and Memory*: “Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a

The Fallen Idol invites a more simplistic theological interpretation: the child after all has a pet serpent, which he keeps hidden in the garden outside of his bedroom, and the title too is rather insistent. But the serpent dies having caused no harm, incinerated by the malevolent Mrs. Baines, and the title was invented by the studio against Reed and Greene's wishes. In fact, having corrected the story's prolepsis and replaced it with a sort of chance omniscience, the film's narrational structure and forms of suspense work pretty thoroughly to undermine any straightforward impression that this is a film about fallenness or the end of innocence. At first Phillipe lies to cover for his friend but then finally decides to tell the "truth"—yet, since he remains ignorant of what happened, this in effect puts him in the wrong. Practically speaking, however, this doesn't matter: the police refuse to listen to him, having established their own empirical basis for exculpating Baines, who, wifeless, is now free to marry his lover. Never mind that the police *too* have the story wrong based on a misinterpretation of the evidence; they, at least, light upon the just course of action, if only accidentally and despite the boy's horrible, nagging insistence that he is telling the truth—which persists as the police turn their backs on him and the film ends (just in time for the boy's mother to return home). A cruel economy thus makes innocence and justice inversely proportional to truth and rightness, and the film winds up being the story of Phillipe falling not out of but *into* a state of innocence, where he will remain perpetually a child, leaving the audience with nothing so much as a stinging sense of how much can be lost in the production of narrative continuity.

But the film has another more peculiar and suggestive (if almost unnoticeable) temporal anomaly. In *Ways of Escape*, Greene expresses a certain fascination with J.W. Dunne's *An*

register in which time is being inscribed" (10). See Gilles Deleuze "Theses on Movement: First commentary on Bergson," *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 1-11.

Experiment with Time (1927), a work of pseudo-psychology that was popular enough in England during the interwar years to be reprinted in two new editions within a decade or so.³⁰ In it, Dunne (a mathematician and aeronautical engineer by day) uses a series of observations about the content of dreams to develop a theory of time in which humans have unconscious access to the future. The implication is not that dreams are predictive, per se, but rather that there is a kind of generalized consciousness, encompassing all time simultaneously, of which the present of any one observer is only a layer.³¹ Greene found this idea to be disturbing and maybe even credible:

Dunne has written...of dreams which draw their symbols from the future as well as the past. Is it possible that a novelist may do the same, since so much of his work comes from the same source as dreams? It is a disquieting idea. Was Zola, when he wrote of the imprisoned miners dying of poisoned air, drawing something from a 'memory' of his own death, smothered with fumes from his coke stove? Perhaps it is just as well for an author not to reread the books he has written. There may be too many hints of an unhappy future. (92)

About half way through *The Fallen Idol*, Baines, accompanied by Phillipe, brings his lover home to the embassy under the mistaken belief that Mrs. Baines (still alive at this point) is safely out of town. In a small courtyard on the side of the building, the boy stops and reaches down to finger a grate he sees there (figure 2.3). "This is a man's hole," he remarks to Julie in his suggestively strained English. "You can get right down to the sewers through here." She ignores

³⁰ While there is no shortage of scholarship on the various ways that late 19th and early 20th century developments in the science and philosophy of time influenced the course of literary history, Dunne's rather outlandish ideas haven't received much attention along these lines, even though they seem to have drawn a fair amount of attention from some of the major British writers of the period. For a study of the influence of *An Experiment with Time* on the literary developments of the interwar years, see Victoria Stewart, "J. W. Dunne and Literary Culture in the 1930s and 1940s," *Literature and History*, vol. 17 no.2 (Autumn 2008), 62-81.

³¹ J.W. Dunne, *An Experiment with Time* (Oxford: Macmillan, 1927).

him, and so does the film itself: the odd moment foreshadows nothing about the plot of *The Fallen Idol* and has nothing apparently to do with the film's symbolic developments. It is thus difficult, in retrospect, to see this as anything other than an unhappy hint, an obscure proleptic glimpse into the sewers of Vienna, where in *The Third Man* Harry Lime will come to his iconic end (figure 2.4): the boy reaches down through the holes of the grate almost to touch the fingertips, reaching up, of the man he could very well become—living, as he does, in a world that systematically rewards deception. It seems, however, that these particular words are not his “sesame,” and so the relation is (until now, I suppose) to be left mercifully undrawn.



Figure 2.3: Philipe reaches down.



Figure 2.4: Lime reaches up.

IV. CONTINUITY THRESHOLDS: CAROL REED'S POSTWAR CITIES

If we are to understand continuity to be “the enemy of life” in the more categorical sense that Greene seems to mean it, in what ways do his postwar collaborations with Reed uphold the continuity error as a form of art? There are a number of ways in which the scholarship and critical reception of Reed's work bears on this question, at least indirectly. Following Charles Drazin's study of the production of *The Third Man*, for instance, one can approach the films in terms of their disbursal of authorship, so that Reed is established not as an auteur—the source

and through line of a coherent artistic vision—but rather, in Drazin’s words, as “cinema’s greatest organizer of chance” (xiv).³² In this way, the films (especially *The Third Man*) appear to be artfully erroneous in the sense that they are defined by whatever it is about them that wasn’t and couldn’t have been intended; they are records, in Bendrix’s words, of how “everything changes.” Such contingencies are amplified, no doubt, by Reed’s decisions for each of his productions with Greene to film on location in urban centers that were in various states of recovery from recent war. *The Third Man*, of course, features a postwar Vienna still largely in ruins but in the process of rebuilding; *The Fallen Idol* began filming in the summer of 1947 in London’s Belgravia neighborhood, where after the war many of the houses were being converted into embassies; and the production crew for *Our Man in Havana* (1959) set up on location in Cuba (with Fidel Castro’s permission) just months after the fall of the Batista regime.

The risk of error and accident inherent to this style of filmmaking would have been compounded rather than mitigated by the fact that much of the filming was also done in the studio—so that the scenes take shape as a somewhat precarious admixture of planned and unplanned scenarios, of a documentary-style neorealism and a process of careful staging. This in fact was the method behind many of Reed’s projects, not only his collaborations with Greene—including, just in the decade after World War II, *Odd Man Out* (1947), which was filmed on location in Belfast and at Alexander Korda’s D&P Studios in Denham, Buckinghamshire; *Outcast Islands* (1951), which was filmed in Sri Lanka and at Shepperton Studios in Surrey; *The Man Between* (1953), which was filmed in Berlin and at Shepperton Studios but also includes a wonderful scene of James Mason expertly ice skating on location at Richmond Ice Rink in London; *A Kid for Two Farthings* (1955), Reed’s last film with Korda and first film in color,

³² Charles Drazin, *In Search of the Third Man* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000).

which features scenes of Petticoat Lane in London's East End; and *Trapeze* (1956), which was an American production but was filmed in Paris, including at the Cirque D'hiver, where Burt Lancaster (a veteran circus performer) did much of his own stunt work.

But pointing this out begins to suggest a signature style of just the sort so often denied to Reed—making him the master of the half-real city, a great artist of false continuity. And indeed many of his films are uniquely characterized by their overwrought efforts to simultaneously document and replicate their scenic subjects. This develops from, say, the model German concentration camps featured in *Night Train to Munich* (1940) to the elaborate reconstructions of the bars and nightclubs of Belfast and Berlin for *Odd Man Out* and *The Man Between* and extends to the magisterial compositing of the artificial and actual ruins of the metropolitan centers of Europe during and after the war, which comprise the chilling backgrounds to his most significant and memorable films.³³

This characterization of Reed's style as fundamentally synthetic in its approach to urban scenes runs contrary to the more general impression that the aesthetic experience of the city in Reed is inherently fractured and disjointed. The visual character of these places, as Rob White observes, always seems to convey "disorientation and alarm," "minds disintegrating" in "tangled labyrinth[s]" reminiscent not just of the German expressionism with which American *film noir* is typically associated but also of the French poetic realism of films like Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937) (46). In this manner, as Marcia Landy puts it, the city in Reed's films appears as "an extension of the characters' personal and interpersonal divisions"—at once a psychological and

³³ One can find an extreme limit of this style in *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965), which starts as a documentary about Michelangelo, then, featuring a moody Charlton Heston as the Renaissance artist and (somehow) Rex Harrison as Pope Julius II, re-enacts the stage-by-stage production of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, which culminates (only at long last as the credits roll) with a still image of the real thing in near entirety. Carol Reed, Dunne, et al., *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005).

sociohistorical portrait of a world entering the Cold War era, of humans dividing and subdividing themselves into all manner of irreconcilable pieces (183).³⁴ “Carol Reed creates a world that is fragmented and fragmentary,” writes Michael Sragow, “where the soul cracks and flies apart...a poetic summary of twentieth century harshness—of what can be called the inhuman condition.”³⁵

These impressions resonate to an extent with Graham Greene’s more tempered sense of his own art as charting the “dangerous edge,” “the narrow boundary between loyalty and disloyalty, between fidelity and infidelity, the mind’s contradictions, the paradox one carries within oneself.” But, as this chapter has so far argued, the movement toward such boundaries—the aesthetic reverence of division, disintegration and infidelity—seems always to entail a proportional expansion of the threshold of continuity, a refinement or realignment of the “effect[s] of a great permanence” that cannot be extricated from the creative process.

This double movement is articulated with a particular poignancy and clarity in the opening sequences of *The Man Between* (1953), Reed’s second film after *The Third Man*.³⁶ This was made without credited involvement from Greene, but he was briefly consulted on the screenplay³⁷; and the film, sharing many of Greene’s thematic concerns, is often (unduly) maligned as a minor rehashing of *The Third Man*. It begins with a British woman, Susanne Mallison (Claire Bloom) arriving in postwar Berlin to visit her brother Martin (Geoffrey Toone), who now lives there with his German wife, Bettina (Hildegard Neff). Susanne will eventually find herself the accidental victim of a kidnapping plot involving Ivo Kern (James Mason), with whom she will become romantically involved despite his wartime association with the Nazis and his current occupation betraying and trafficking West Germans to the East. In the film’s opening,

³⁴ Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

³⁵ Michael Sragow, “The Odd Man Out,” *The Current* (The Criterion Collection, 1995).

³⁶ Carol Reed, et al., *The Man Between*, digitally restored (London: Studiocanal, 2016)

³⁷ See Peter William Evans, *Carol Reed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)

Bettina meets Susanne at the airport, and the two women travel by car to her and Martin's home, occasioning a cinematographic tour of the postwar city filmed by Desmond Dickinson, who had been a documentarian during the war. Bettina is self-conscious about how she wants her sister-in-law to experience Berlin: "I wanted to show you something nice first," she explains. "They say first impressions last longer." The car thus travels first through the rebuilt commercial center, showing the city at its best before it approaches the Brandenburg Gate and the other vaguer thresholds of the pre-wall East, where the ruin and rubble extend indistinctly and indefinitely around them.

When they arrive, the home appears as a solitary garrison in the surreal landscape of the easternmost frontier of the Western bloc (figure 2.5). The dramatic force of the sequence as they pull up derives largely from the way the eye is drawn to follow the moving vehicle deep into the long shot as it approaches the front gate of the house. This right to left movement is picked up on the other side of a cut to a reverse shot (figure 2.6) by the left to right movement of a child who has been trailing the car on his bicycle. Though the two images appear in a standard sequence meant to establish continuity, it is not at all hard to see that the documentary realism of the second image stands in contrast, or counterpoint, to the aesthetic refinement and painterly quality of the first. Indeed, the difference is pronounced enough that one wonders whether Reed might

actually have meant to *emphasize* the incommensurability of the two images, if in clandestine ways that never betray an avant-garde impulse to disrupt the narrative.



Figure 2.5: Looking east.



Figure 2.6: Looking west.

For example, the towering ruin in the foreground on the left side of first shot is made even more conspicuous by being echoed within the same shot in background of the house on the opposite side of the frame—but then this rather massive ruin, along with the man and child beginning to cross the road in front of it, do not persist across the cut. Instead, a very different ruin appears, but on the opposite side of the road, such that it imposes itself in the same position on the left side of the frame as the original structure that has now apparently vanished from where it should be on the right. There are other less obvious examples, but these features alone are sufficient to suggest at the very least that fidelity was not chief among the filmmakers' aesthetic concerns here, but was subordinated to a kind of abstract visual rhyme, which works to emphasize the opposing views from west to east and east to west. The basic geometric forms of the two shots are composed so as to create a doubling effect rather than the mirroring or inversion that one would expect in the reverse shot, which thus holds in relief the carefully constructed contrast between the vertical and horizontal patterning that distinguishes each shot respectively.

Countervailing aesthetic priorities structure these shots, a precisely articulated but exceedingly subtle interplay between the basic conventions of continuity editing and the poetry of discontinuity—an art which can only take shape at the fringes of perception. The least interesting, perhaps, but most prominent feature of the first shot is not in fact the ruin but the streetlamp. It's hard to imagine that the filmmakers would have expected anyone to notice this, but the lamp seems also to be the most *permanent* feature of the scene. It has receded deep into the background of the long shot in the second image, but it looks more correct than virtually everything else in the shot: it is positioned where it ought to be on the corner, and it has twirled around on its axis in order to guarantee that—despite all appearances to the contrary—everything here has faithfully obeyed the spatial logic of the reverse shot, having upheld the 180 degree rule that forms the bedrock of the laws of continuity editing. It is as if, in the instantaneous and unperceived gap between the two shots, the whole scene of destruction has been destroyed and (minus a couple of humans) recreated again around this single enduring light source. And if the significance of the new image comes from it being fused into its background, to recall William James's figuration, this is only possible if time (or at least the movie) can be played in reverse: returning to the first image, we can find “the dying echo of whence” the new ruin “came to us”

and see in retrospect the more original lattice-worked synthesis from which its distinct horizontality is to be derived in error (figures 2.7 and 2.8).



Figure 7: *Erroneous ruin, original streetlamp.*

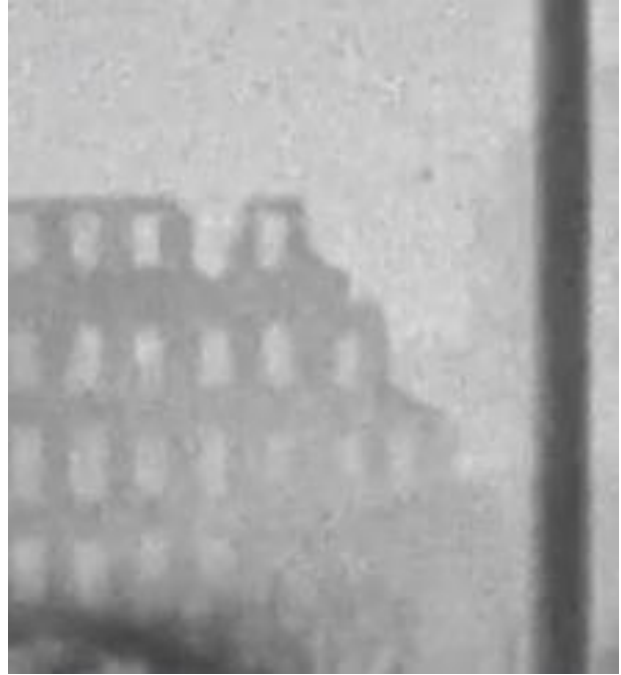


Figure 8: *"The dying echo" behind the streetlamp.*

If the poetic nuance of such continuity errors is unlikely ever to be noticed, their construction seems too thorough and too intricate to be unconscious; their effects, too elaborate to be subliminal. But should they not still fall below any reasonable threshold of attention? In his recent "too close" study of Alfred Hitchcock, D.A. Miller finds in such continuity riddles a form of duplicity: once the errors are noticed, they create an immediate impression that (like a Barthesian myth) cannot be rationally explained away afterward. "Their visual insistence...fuses with their semantic ambiguity to create little irresolvable cruxes all over Hitchcock's cinema," betraying the "strong narrative drive" of his films to a counter-propulsive "understyle." This understyle cuts against the auteurist premise of aesthetic continuity with "a teasing insistence on disjuncture that asks to be factored in even when it doesn't add up"; and though it recedes into

the background, it becomes for Miller the “main source of...enigmatic richness” in Hitchcock’s films (14-18).³⁸

But as I’ve begun to suggest here—and as I will trace more thoroughly in the following section—the art of the continuity error for Hitchcock’s transatlantic foil, the “great organizer of chance,” would have to be more or less inverted. If this art also suggests a certain counter-propulsive tendency, it in contrast entails an insistent rationality, a “grim reason” as Greene would put it—a synthetic process that works to extend and re-articulate the thresholds of continuity precisely where one would expect them to be most thoroughly broken up in the cinema of the postwar city, in its plurality of incommensurable images and (to adopt a phrase from Deleuze) “irrational cuts.”

V. THE “GRIM REASON” OF *THE THIRD MAN*³⁹

The most famous moment in *The Third Man* is of course Orson Welles (as Harry Lime) delivering his grim pronouncements about the last several centuries’ worth of European history and culture, his casual justification of “warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed.” “Nobody thinks in terms of human beings,” he declares from the drone-like vantage of the Wiener Riesenrad—the giant Ferris wheel that dominates Vienna’s Prater amusement park—as he peers at the moving dots below. But the way in which this inhumane view of postwar Europe has dominated the critical history of the film tends to obscure the image of Vienna that actually appears in the movie—which, in precise contrast to Lime’s version of it, seems built much more narrowly from

³⁸ D.A. Miller, *Hidden Hitchcock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

³⁹ Portions of this section present substantial revisions and expansions of material previously published as “A Second View: *The Third Man* from Eye Level,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 1, 2015.

its human beings outward, even in the context of so much sublime footage of the city ruined and emptied of life.



Figure 2.9: Moving dots.



Figure 2.10: Welles's high angle.

This disjuncture is emblematic of how Reed's career has fallen more generally under the shadow of Welles's. In *Cinema I*, Deleuze (like a number of other critics before and after him) presumes that Welles was "closely involved in [the] construction" of *The Third Man* or, if he wasn't, that at the very least "Reed was an inspired disciple of Welles."⁴⁰ This conclusion is based on the observation that the film "rediscover[s]" and "profoundly combine[s]" two distinct cinematographic movements that Deleuze takes to be signatures of Welles's style:

Orson Welles often describes two movements which are formed, one of which is like a horizontal linear flight in a kind of elongated, striated cage, lattice-worked, and the other a circular sweep whose vertical axis performs a high or a low angle shot from a height (21).

Deleuze has in mind a very specific concept of cinematic movement, which he derives from Bergson: the camera here operates like consciousness to continuously divide and reunite sets of

⁴⁰ For a well-researched demystification of the mythology surrounding Welles's participation in the film's production, see Drazin's chapter "Stealing the Limelight" in *In Search of the Third Man*, cited above.

discrete perceptual elements in a way that expresses an indivisible whole. This form of expression is evident in the way that, through “certain great movements,” the style that characterizes a director’s entire oeuvre (however heterogeneous it may be) can be traced as a signature in the minutest details of a single shot from a single film (21).

In sidelining Reed, however, Deleuze chooses not to follow up on his own curious suggestion that the relationship between Welles and Reed’s films entails a kind of doubling of cinematic consciousness, as if *The Third Man* was necessary to produce the more “profound” synthesis that had been lacking between Welles’s horizontal and vertical movements—as if, in other words, Reed’s style resolves the inherent duplicity of a style with two signatures. Why, among the other directors that Deleuze mentions in this context (e.g. Hitchcock, Kurosawa and Murnau) should Welles in particular need a disciple? Would his style not endure without believers?

These are unanswerable questions, of course, which Deleuze probably didn’t intend to raise; but the paradoxes of cinematic continuity that underlie them are addressed with remarkable precision in the formal construction of *The Third Man*. Though the film is generally recognized for its baffling visual obliquity—for its extreme canting, its very low and very high angles, its unusual off-screen vanishing points—it is also exceedingly careful to establish distinctions between the vertical and horizontal axes of its filmic territory, and it loads these distinctions with meaning. On the one hand, the great wheel rises mechanically above a kind of vast memorial—not a memorial to the dead, exactly, but to amusement? to some prewar ideal of Machine Age recreation?—the Russian-occupied zone below transformed, as Graham Greene writes in his treatment of the film, into “great glaciers of snow and ice,” the wheel “revolving slowly over the foundations of merry-go-rounds like abandoned millstones, the rusting iron of smashed tanks

which nobody had cleared away, the frost-nipped weeds where the snow was thin.” On the other hand, a second Vienna has begun to appear, its streets “repaired up to the first story,” as Greene continues, so that upon the arrival there of Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) the stage is set, if not for an entirely human point of view, then at least for a certain restricted cinematic one, built and populated “only at eye level,” crowded with canting bodies filmed at close range, but left unrendered vertically (15).⁴¹

To the extent that the distinctions between the horizontal and vertical movements in the film are at once spatial and temporal, their sustained discontinuity forms a visual basis for the film’s ethical suspense. As long as the fugitive Lime keeps his movements outside of Vienna’s eye-level grid, he remains free of its jurisdictions. His evasions are more than a game of disguise or concealment; he keeps almost entirely to his own axis. Take, for instance, the preamble to the climactic chase through Vienna’s sewer system: a setup in the Hoher Markt, the city’s oldest square reduced mostly to shadowy ruins, which surround an improbably luminous Café Marc Aurel. Martins sips coffee and awaits Lime’s appearance. Major Calloway (Trevor Howard) has successfully convinced him of the truth and gravity of Lime’s crimes (a penicillin racket that has left many people, including children, dead or maimed); and Martins has, in turn, agreed to betray his old friend and help the police spring a trap. A shrewdly edited sequence conveys the scenario without dialogue: waiting in suspense, sentries are tactically positioned so that the police command every possible sightline radiating from the center of the square, spokes in a giant horizontal wheel that renders visible every possible approach. More specifically, Reed alternates between, on the one hand, close-ups of the statuesque guards, their eyes panning from left to right like rudimentary CCTV cameras, and, on the other, still images of the ostensive territory

⁴¹ Graham Greene, *The Third Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

these looks survey: expressionistic glimpses of Vienna's streets at night, archetypes of the *noir* cityscape. Rigidly horizon-bound as the closed-circuit eyeballs are, however, they allow Lime, who enters the scene from his characteristic height (perched many levels up on a ruined building) to remain effectively invisible. In stark contrast, Reed provides Lime's own view, which, angled downward, pans magisterially across the entire scene, and the audience is meant to understand that while the sentries' looks are partial, static, limited, and fragmentary, Lime comprehends the whole picture.

But his picture is wrong!—or, at least, not quite compatible with the picture that has already been presented. In fact, this famous set piece, which seems to be about nothing more than it is about visual comprehensiveness and continuity, displays a remarkable number of gaps and inconsistencies of vision, which are as difficult to spot as they are precise in their implications. For instance, immediately before we are given Lime's view, Calloway and his sergeant (Bernard Lee) are approached by an old balloon-seller who, a lost wraith from the Prater or some other firebombed recreational zone stumbling into the wrong scene, menaces them until they are forced to purchase a balloon. This is one of the most vivid and memorable images of the film, but why doesn't Lime see any of it? (Everyone else on set seems to.) Doesn't the suspense, here, derive specifically from the fact that the transaction is comically conspicuous, that these men are trying to hide but have instead acquired a homing beacon to draw Lime's eye? Shouldn't he at least see the magic lantern show, the grotesque oversized shadows that the old man casts

against the square's storefronts as he conducts his business? Shouldn't he see at least one or two of the lookouts camped out everywhere and only partially concealed?



Figure 2.11: The balloon-seller's conspicuous approach.



Figure 2.12: Lime's alternate view of the same scene.

Instead, looking down at the same place, he sees a different world—a past version of Vienna superimposed on this one, as a horse-drawn carriage enters the roundabout (not unlike an odd preindustrial merry-go-round) and another enters from the right of the frame, having just crossed in front of the Café Marc Aurel unheeded by any of the many vigilant eyes it must have crossed at the same time. So incongruous is Lime's vision of the scene that his actions proceed as though they are, in turn, exempt from its logic. He simply steps right in through the back door of the café. Since the café was directly across the square from him moments before, Lime has had to descend from his perch and cover a great deal of territory traversing sightlines without being seen.⁴² He has dropped from his own world in his own time to this one without the need to obey its rules, except maybe to keep his former promise to Martins: “I will meet you any place, any time.”

⁴² In *The Third Man's Vienna*, Brigitte Timmermann suggest that the balloon transaction provides Lime with a diversion, but Lime himself doesn't see it, and there are just too many eyes involved here for that explanation to suffice (197). The *audience* may be diverted, however, should it be noticed that the balloon that Lee holds on set at the London Films Studio doesn't match any of those offered by the seller, who remains in Vienna.

The film's temporal incommensurability thus allows Lime to elude the ethical alliance formed between Calloway and Martins, and so long as the scenic composition of Reed's Vienna holds the prospect of a more effective synthesis in suspense, Lime cannot be brought to justice. The impression that the character moves extra-diegetically works, as well, to allegorize the notorious circumstances of Welles's own involvement in the film's production, his various unimpugned betrayals of his contractual obligation to Korda. Indeed, the main feature of both Lime and Welles's role as the third man of *The Third Man* is that, for the most part, they're not actually in it. As Drazin reports, Welles never showed up on set when he was supposed to, forcing the production team to improvise, putting other actors in disguise or casting shadow-Limes against walls when no real Lime could be apprehended. The assistant director himself, Guy Hamilton, plays Lime in his first appearance in the ruins above the square (68-81). In this way the film's scenic two-timing does in fact produce a visible record of Welles's own double signature, if not quite in the way Deleuze meant.

But Lime's alternate plot is not ultimately sustainable. For cats, as everyone knows, do not respect any rules or boundaries pertaining to the space-time continuum, nor would they trouble themselves with the technical and metaphysical quandaries such boundaries entail in *The Third Man*; which is why Harry Lime's favorite cat—strutting from this world to that and back again with as little regard for the laws of nature as it has for the conventions of continuity editing (there are three cats, not one)—provides Reed with the perfect device to force Lime across the dark threshold into the half-light of Vienna's horizontal grid. This is one of the film's most iconic images: a drastically canted shot of Lime half-concealed in a darkened doorway, betrayed by the cat's meow even before his face is lit for the first time (now nearly two-thirds of the way into the film) from a neighbor's bedroom window above. Martins attempts to approach him, but

is blocked by a passing car; and Lime (just as he will later do in the Hoher Markt) evades contact by way of an apparent continuity break: when the automobile speeds past on its horizontal trajectory, interrupting Martins's view for a fraction of a second — much too fast for Lime to escape—Lime vanishes, crossing the frame neither to the right nor to the left, rematerializing only as footsteps in the distance and shadows projected on the walls before disappearing again into the sewers below.



Figure 2.13: Lime on the threshold.



Figure 2.14: Martins cut off.

This sort of editing trick, in which a shot is briefly blocked by a passing object and someone vanishes with supernatural haste, has now become a conventional way to initiate a chase in countless thrillers. But Reed, in this early example, places a special emphasis on the breach of continuity, allowing the moment to strain the film's realism almost to the breaking point in what seems at first glance like a rather heavy-handed cinematic sleight of hand. Richard Misek suggests that the effect here recalls the trickery of Georges Méliès and fits a broader pattern in which Lime seems generally exempt from the demands of continuity editing.⁴³ And Rob White has noted that, though the film mostly earned favorable reviews on its release, its occasional skeptics were bothered by just this sort of thing: "I feel a shade of disappointment," writes one British reviewer, "at the reappearance of the familiar trick and the familiar situation";

⁴³ Richard Misek, *Wrong Geometries in The Third Man* (Rouge Press, 2007).

or another: “Mr. Reed has never elaborated his style so desperately, nor used so many tricks in the presentation of a film”; and one more from across the Atlantic: “Mr. Reed has...packaged the whole bag of his cinematic tricks” (quoted in White, 22).

But a closer look at the sequence reveals that actually there’s no cinematic trick to it at all and that Lime in fact does not disappear in the cut—quite the contrary, as it turns out. There is, however, a substantial violation of continuity involved, which is perhaps what provokes the assumption of deceit—a trick only insofar as it tricks the audience into feeling tricked. The sequence is structured around the movement of the car as it divides Martins and Lime, passing across the frame twice—once on each side of the cut. In the first shot, we have a head-on view from behind Martins as the car begins to pass in front of Lime, who crouches as though he’s about to run. Instead, however, he disappears, and—as if to offer an obscure rebuttal to Méliès—he seems to do so *before* the cut, before the car has even finished passing. His shadowy head and torso aren’t where they should be, framed in the window of the car as it goes by (figure 2.15); and, once it does, his luminous shoes are, it seems, no longer where they had formerly been edging their way out from the darkness at the base of the threshold (figure 2.16).



Figure 2.15: Nothing visible behind the car.



Figure 2.16: Has Lime already disappeared?

But is there still a trace a toe of a shining shoe? And is that a face still receding in the center of the darkened doorway, just at the top left fringe of the passing car? If the quick cut does not seem to *make* the magic happen, it does frustrate the first opportunity to verify that it *hasn't*—but the continuity error that it thereby produces seems constructed precisely to allow for another look. Conventionally, the second shot here should present a match on action, picking up the movement of the vehicle where the previous shot left off in order to create the illusion of continuous motion across the cut. But the illusion is broken: the shot instead sets up a parallel sequence, jumping back in time to show the same movement reenacted from a different angle (figure 2.17). In effect the cut makes Lime erroneously *reappear* (which is what Lime tends to do anyway); and providing a view behind the curtain, as it were, it allows us to be sure that the disappearing act had nothing to do with the cut (figure 2.18). No editing tick, this is magic of an older sort, a show that might as well have been performed on stage.



Figure 2.17: Time rewound for a parallel sequence.



Figure 2.18: Lime disappears with no cut.

In this manner, the continuity error—literally staged on a literal threshold—disrupts the illusion of cinematic continuity so as to replace it surreptitiously with a pre-cinematic illusion of discontinuity. A great irony, then, is that this sequence—one of the most famous in the history of

British cinema—is actually more realistic than it appears to be, documenting a kind of creative evolution of theatrical magic that manages to elude the media-technological history of its own form. This, in other words, is a drama of continuity that refuses to make a technical distinction between continuity and discontinuity.

Deleuze's writing on film is helpful to consider in this context, since his adherence to Bergson makes him uniquely careful to maintain that there is no inherent opposition between the continuous and the discontinuous in cinema. Thus, the opposition that I alluded to above between rational and irrational cuts is not one of discontinuity and continuity between shots. "On the contrary," he writes in *Cinema 2*, "the cuts or breaks in cinema have always formed the power of the continuous" (181).⁴⁴ He uses the term *rational cut* in the mathematical sense associated with Richard Dedekind to indicate a point that divides two sets but that is also representable as part of one set or the other. An *irrational cut*, on the other hand, refers to an "interstice" that "does not form part of either set, one of which has no more an end than the other has a beginning." Irrational cuts, which Deleuze finds to be more characteristic of cinema after World War II, produce what he calls without negative connotation "false continuity," an "interaction of two images [that] engenders or traces a frontier which belongs to neither one nor the other" (181). False continuity thus allows for a direct presentation of duration (time), which is not subordinated to the mere images of movement (space) found on either side of the cut.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema2: The Time-Image*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989).

⁴⁵ A similar conception of false or irrational continuity is reflected in literary terms in Bowen's forms of suspense and suspension. To recall a key passage from *The Heat of the Day* quoted in Chapter 1: "Having hung for just that instant more suspended the music now broke with a light crash." The word *suspended* divides the sentence into distinct syllabic and syntactic halves but does not itself quite belong to either half, and so it seems to convey the scene's temporal duration more directly than the spatialized descriptions of its musical movements are able to do.

Insofar as Reed's postwar frontiers and urban thresholds comprise an art of false continuity in this sense, uncuttable figures like the *The Third Man*'s unvanishing Lime, or the enduring streetlamp of *The Man Between*, trace the opposing frontiers of a rational continuity: even as they recede into the background, they represent an implacable metonymy that, obeying a stringent realism, fuses one image to the next—a series of joints that cannot be disarticulated even when humans sometimes seem to vanish from the human scene.

If the phantasmagoric fantasy of Lime's discontinuous existence evades the media-technical advent of cinema, then his rewound return to the threshold of continuity certainly does not; and by the time we get to the Hoher Markt and Lime's subsequent demise, the inexorable reason of the cinematic apparatus appears to have won out over any alternatives. Though Lime's first disappearing act may have been a magic show, there is no doubt that his fatal appearance in the full light of the Café Marc Aurel puts him in the realm of another sort of show altogether. Never is this technological distinction so clear as it is in the decisive moment when Calloway convinces Martins that Lime is a criminal, the precondition for the betrayal that brings about his downfall. Calloway begins the presentation of evidence with what he calls a "magic lantern show," an allusion to pre-cinematic forms of theatrical image projection. But quickly, after entreating Martins to "look here," his voice fades out, along with the image of the clumsy projecting apparatus over which the sergeant fumbles, to be replaced by what can only be found in a motion picture: a montage, complete with optical effects. The major ethical turn in the film is therefore carried out strictly in the language of film. The mechanics of courtroom argumentation are replaced by the more immediate (and, perhaps, more intimate) visual logic of cinema: a series of shots of evidentiary objects (fingerprints, photographs, notes, etc.) with no dialogue, one dissolving into the next until a perfect superimposition of frames encircles

Martins's eyes within a magnifying glass, answering Calloway's call for him to *look* by insisting via optical effect that now, at last, he *sees*.



Figure 2.19: Looking at the evidence.



Figure 2.20: Seeing the evidence.

Reed thus ties to the ethical argument of the film a reflexive argument about the rhetoric of film editing—a suggestion that cinematic ideas are best conveyed through the synthesis of disparate images and, further, that the dissolve is more compelling than the cut as both a technique of persuasion and a signal of truth. The broad context for such an argument extends back at least to the Soviet montage movement of the 1920s, but this sequence is more immediately engaged with postwar concerns about the historiographic, moral and ideological function of documentary records of humanitarian atrocities. The scene seems to be a fairly direct allusion to a similar scene in Welles's own *The Stranger* (1946), in which an agent of the Allied War Crimes Commission (Edward G. Robinson) shows a small-town New-Englander named Mary Longstreet (Loretta Young) real footage of the German concentration camps as part of his

efforts to convince her that her husband (played by Welles) is a fugitive Nazi and one of the architects of the genocide (figures 2.21 and 2.22).⁴⁶



Figure 2.21: Mr. Wilson screens his argument.



Figure 2.22: Mary listens.

A key difference between the two scenes is that, in Welles's version, film does not speak for itself: the detective literally imposes himself between the spectator and the screen so that the images are projected onto his face as he speaks, a superimposition that supplements rather than subsuming the oratorical performance of the reasoning process. In *The Third Man*, the reflexive method through which still images are translated into the language of cinema transfers the focus of the rhetorical drama from the performer to the audience, from the voice to the image, so that the aesthetic experience of metonymy as such—the impression that Martins's impressions connect—is sufficient to demonstrate Lime's guilt and justify Martins's cooperation with the police.

But this of course *is* a trick, which depends on a belief in continuity that has no empirical basis. This is perhaps another one of those cinematic deceptions that bothered the few

⁴⁶ This was the first major Hollywood production to feature documentary footage of the holocaust. For a study of *The Stranger* in the context of the rhetoric and ideology of postwar films about the holocaust and of Welles's own antifascist activism, see Jennifer L. Barker, "Documenting the Holocaust in Orson Welles's *The Stranger*," *Film and Genocide*, edited by Kristi M. Wilson and Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012) 45-66.

contemporary reviewers that disliked the film. The gambit has inherent aesthetic risks. The optical printing process used to produce the dissolving effect involves projecting and rephotographing individual picture elements, which means the quality of the final image is compromised: there's a slight jolting of the frame at the beginning and end of where the original images overlap and a loss of resolution throughout the transition. In other words, the continuity effect produced by the dissolve, in contrast to the standard cut, comes at the cost of a loss of fidelity, and threatens (if accidentally noticed) to betray the editorial hand and spoil the effect.

It bears remarking that recent developments in digital film technology would seem to render this particular problem of continuity obsolete. In 2015, *The Third Man* was digitally restored by Deluxe Media on behalf of Studiocanal for a 4K release; and, as part of the process, the dissolves were smoothed out and so now appear seamless. In an interview, Mark Bonnici, who headed the restoration, explained the reasoning for this. The goal was to create a viewing experience as close as possible to that of the original audiences. The graininess of the original film is retained; but, in what Bonnici characterized as a modest intervention, corrections were made to small movements and other potentially distracting effects of the laboratory process of making composite images using an optical printer.⁴⁷ In theory, these effects would have been less distracting to a 1940s audience than they would be to an audience today (and certainly less awkward than Calloway's magic lantern) simply because the contemporary viewers would have been more accustomed to them.

Such a process of habituation suggests that the thresholds of cinematic continuity are historically variable, and so even as its little errors and distractions are corrected by the modest digital touch of the future, *The Third Man* still remains a record of change—and it does so

⁴⁷ Marc Bonnici, personal interview, August 5, 2015.

precisely for the effect of its permanence. In other words, the effect of the dissolving evidence, then and now, is the same: the audience experiences Martins's transition out of the dazzling sphere of Lime's influence as a refinement of the medium, a movement beyond one obsolete mode of theatrical presentation or another—a disillusionment, to be sure, but one that entails the production of a newer, sleeker form of illusion.

While Lime's own cinematic high ground, as it were, is ultimately meant to be ironic (the film hints as much early on when the porter at Martins's hotel [Paul Hörbiger], with a weak grasp of the English language, gestures towards hell above and heaven below), the manner in which he is brought down to the restricted domain of the camera at eye level, to be trapped and destroyed, doesn't necessarily suggest a better view. Beyond its symbolic resonance, the sewer chase provides a very literal corrective to the bungled Hoher Markt operation: Lime's movements are now confined more or less to a single story worth of vertical space (except where his fingertips breach the sewer grate in his final, futile ascent), and, in turn, a couple of his pursuer's eyeballs have enhanced their horizontal pan with a slight vertical tilt to put Lime in range. But his death appears to be less a victory than it is an act of mercy, one which spares the murderer, at the moment he's caught, from the dismal continuity of the film's horizontal spaces — precisely what he seems always to have sought. While Lime was able to indulge the fantasy of a view from an alternative Vienna raised beyond Vienna (a death wish perhaps), all the human beings he leaves behind are left to face the one that merely extends beyond the frame, just outside the camera's line of sight.

Though the dreariness of the finale is somewhat mitigated by the subtle archness of Lime's death (a kind of capstone to the film's general tone of dark humor, its half-casual manner of providing lighthearted amusement), this Vienna—the one that exists on the margins of what's presented on-screen, the one that only just eludes viewing—seems to be a truly miserable and humorless place. This is where Martins shoots and kills his closest friend. This is where he observes Lime's victims, off-screen figures that we don't see but that, through a grim metonymic attachment, retain their frightening continuity with the figures we do: nurses, cribs, surgical tools, cotton balls, and teddy-bears (figure 2.23). This is where Lime's former girlfriend, the playactress Anna Schmidt (Alida Valli), is afforded no exit when, after receding far into a gapping darkness at the edge of her apartment but arriving at no vanishing point and no chance for a disappearing act (figure 2.24), she must return to face the camera and her arrest by the leering agent of the International Patrol.



Figure 2.23: Offscreen horror.



Figure 2.24: Vida with no vanishing point.

Such impressions of a third Vienna, one that belongs neither to Lime nor to the camera, accumulate at the margins of the screen until reaching their clearest expression in the film's final gesture. As Anna slowly approaches the camera from the sublime depth of the long shot, the cemetery's trees to her left and right seem to extend infinitely from their horizontal vanishing point, but their branches have been cut short at the top, their vertical extensions dismantled in an

obscure visual echo of Lime's defeat. Martins leans on a wooden cart that appears to have been forgotten on the side of the road in a former century (perhaps the same century that Lime saw superimposed on what was left of the Hoher Markt after World War II), waiting there to haul away the branches that no longer top the trees. When Anna, in her choice to remain faithful to her dead lover, passes him by without a word or a glance and steps out of the movie at the lower right side of the screen, the gesture is final but provides no closure: we are given no assurance that she has made it safely into the wings, for she is far from the theater where she and Martins first met; and so we must assume that she continues her long walk, that the cemetery road beyond the near-infinity of what we see of it exists in perfect continuation of what we don't, its inconceivable scale functioning not as some grand memorial to the many human bodies that lie buried there along with Lime's, but functioning instead to extend indefinitely the radius of Martins's solitude among them.



Figure 2.25: No exit.



Figure 2.26: No end.



Figure 3.1: Raymond Chandler putting on gloves. February, 1958.

Chapter 3 - Raymond Chandler's Unretrospective Suspense

I. "MOMENTS IN EMPTY ROOMS"

In a remarkable coincidence of literary-critical reflection, Elizabeth Bowen seems to have been drawn to Raymond Chandler's fiction by the same empty record—the same unwritten scenic background to human intuition—that Graham Greene had been drawn to in hers. To recall a bit more of Greene's essay, "The Dark Backwards," referred to in the previous chapter:

Miss Bowen...has made of her omissions a completely individual method, she has dramatized ignorance. How with so little known of the 'backward and abysm' [of time] can she convey her characters with any clearness? She makes it the virtue of her characters that they are three parts mystery; the darkness which hides their past makes the cerebrations which we are allowed to follow the more vivid...[T]he characters understand each other without our losing the sense of mystery: they must be able to tell all from a gesture, a whisper, a written sentence: they have to be endowed with an inhuman intuition...Unable to convey the passage of time, she has made capital of the gap in the records. (58)¹

In a 1949 review of Chandler's first postwar novel, *The Little Sister* (alongside a review of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*), Bowen writes that Chandler's "genius" is evident in how he "suggests what civilization *could* be by dwelling on its appalling lapses and cracks." "Perhaps the secret of Chandler[']s narrative art," she continues, is that, much more than that the "average thriller," "it conjures into being, behind the story, a sort of other dimension—a dimension of

The archive image of Chandler putting on gloves is from *Raymond Chandler Papers, 1930-1959*, UCLA Special Collections, Collection 638, Box 1, Folder 10.

¹ Graham Greene, "The Dark Backward," *Collected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2014).

silences, of piercing intuitions, of untimeable moments in empty rooms, of unreadable secrets behind pairs of eyes that look at you, of stunning confrontations by sheer loneliness” (34, emphasis original).²

Located only in the empty recesses of another author’s work, time is figured for both Greene and Bowen as a kind of suspension medium, an all but contentless milieu out of which characters transpire in a flitting and fragmentary way—brief but vivid bursts of mental activity and bodily gesture that mark the limits of human sympathy. If for Greene the clarity of these movements derives from a sense that the past is lost to representation, for Bowen they take shape in Chandler’s work as an image of the future, a social vision that seems defined less by shoring up the fragments of what remains of “civilization” after war than it is by the sheer, vacant form of time itself, conceptualized as an alternate dimension. The posthuman thrill of this postwar world (more than that of the “average thriller”) is found once again in an aesthetic practice that delineates what might be called (by inverting the Husserlian formulation) the consciousness of external time. Bowen here imagines an art form that can depict without paradox “moments in empty rooms”—a not quite articulable sense that, as I put it before, perceptions and memories

² “Elizabeth Bowen’s Book Reviews,” *The Tatler*, 6 July 1949. For his part, Chandler didn’t seem to care at all for Bowen’s work. In a 1949 letter to his agent Bernice Baumgarten, he writes of her with a kind of impetuous condescension (in reference, it seems, to *The Heat of the Day*): “I get a lot of fun sticking pins in the popular balloons. The most fantastic pratfall of the moment is Elizabeth Bowen’s last book which sports a screaming parody of Henry James. Jamie Hamilton wrote me that the English critics are tying themselves in knots trying to be polite to her (because of course they know she is potentially a fine writer), knowing all the time that the poor girl is giving an exhibition of what happens when an over-earnest writer completely loses her sense of humor” (quoted in *The Raymond Chandler Papers*, edited by Tom Hiney and Frank MacShane (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), 106). However, in 1947 he had expressed no small degree of pride in having the British re-issues of his own novels reviewed by someone so esteemed as Elizabeth Bowen (See letter to James Sandoe, quoted in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, edited by Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 149. I have been unable to track down the earlier review or reviews to which he might refer, though Bowen’s 1949 piece on *The Little Sister* (cited above) does suggest that she was familiar with all of his previous novels.

are imprinted on things in a manner that is not quite intelligible as an allegory of writing or some other technique of information storage.

As I argued in chapter 1, Bowen herself attempts this in *The Heat of the Day* through a rigorous formal reduction. The novel carefully isolates the various rhetorical forms of the present that take shape in a time when classical Aristotelian conceptions of past, present and future are under attack on numerous fronts, i.e. the “‘time being’ which war has made the very being of time” (109)—the time of suspended intimacies, of asynchronous instants, of past presents, and of present pasts. These temporal contortions control the novel’s sense of suspense, confounding the anticipatory logic that would seem essential to it and marking a broader shift in the existential ground of the 20th-century novel—a literal and figurative midpoint between the perpetual (and perpetually recursive) post-humanistic suspense of the cold war period and the more humanistic conditions of narrative suspense of which these might be considered the accidental result. By separating out the various rhetorical forms of time and pinning them with surgical precision to the different characters as they appear to each other, the novel envisions a world in which the phenomenal present—“the immense today”—is quarantined and forced into relief. In doing so, it uncovers “behind the story,” as it were, a “core of absolute inhumanity” (155). This figure is structurally akin to Bergson’s pure duration in the sense that it is absolute both in its continuity and in its heterogeneity—but it lacks the vital impulses of psychology: it presents itself to Stella Rodney as a contentless mode of sympathetic involvement, a “being” whose appearance she can’t remember—“continuous, secretive, dense, weighty, locked in himself and face to face, beside her, with the unbounded night in which no clock struck” (155).

As I argued in chapter 2, the object of much of Greene’s work was to avoid externalizing time in this way—i.e. in terms of pure “unbounded” continuity—because he found aesthetic

conceptions of continuity in fiction and in film to be the “enemy of life.” In a more tempered way than the avant-garde movements of the period, he (alone and in collaboration with Carol Reed) sought to delimit rather than to uphold the conventions of narrative continuity that dominated the forms of literary and cinematic realism in the years after the war. This was an art drawn, in Greene’s words, to “dangerous edges,” to “the narrow boundary between loyalty and disloyalty, between fidelity and infidelity, the mind’s contradictions, the paradox one carries within oneself.” This was to be an art of error and of accident—of discontinuity and irrationality—but it is one that seems always to fall into a pattern of “grim reason,” an intractable system of metonymic attachment; and in its perpetual failure to distinguish the “edges” or thresholds of relation it too tends instead to produce, in Bowen’s words, “stunning confrontations by sheer loneliness,” a purely formal structure of continuity and attachment emptied of human sympathy and engagement (as in the final shot of *The Third Man* or in the proleptic scenes of old age and death in “The Basement Room”).

In Chandler’s postwar Los Angeles, external time—the vague empty form of a future civilization that transpires at the phenomenal limits of the present one—is figured more concretely in the ruthless stereotypification of human interaction, in the “inhuman” convergence of irrational, will-less acts of extreme violence with the “perfection” and “cool efficiency” of the administrative logic of business relations (“The Pencil,” 1239).³ This recursive process—which resembles the military processing that, in *The Heat of the Day*, transforms Stella’s son Roderick from a person into a process—could be described as the epitome of continuity that precedes the “epitome of discontinuity” in Adorno’s famous formulation: “the total menace which organized

³ I quote here from the last published Philip Marlowe story, “The Pencil,” *Raymond Chandler: Collected Stories* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2002), but these terms recur in similar contexts throughout Chandler’s work.

mankind poses to organized men” (320).⁴ In the hardboiled detective novel, the dominant figure for such organization is not the military but rather, to quote Philip Marlowe, “the Outfit, the Syndicate, the big mob, or whatever name you want to use for it” (“The Pencil,” 1238).

Chandler’s vision of 20th-century America is defined largely by Marlowe’s unrelenting belief in this sort of thing, whatever it is—“you know damn well it exists...[and] you can’t beat it” (“The Pencil,” 1238). In the first Marlowe novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939), the organization is for the most part clearly nameable and traceable to a set of specific historical circumstances: its origin seems to coincide squarely with the lifting of prohibition in the United States, a market upheaval that demanded that bootleggers adapt, diversify, and reorganize their trades in order to sustain their livelihoods as pseudo-legitimate business owners. This shift is figured as an evolutionary process that selects for “top flight racketeers with business brains,” those whose behavior is directed by “good policy” rather than “personal feelings.” (*The Big Sleep*, 683).⁵ This figure recurs in each of the Marlowe novels, but even as early as *Farewell, My Lovely* (1942), the organization itself becomes a far more abstract and pervasive menace. If, in *The Big Sleep*, the gangster-turned-entrepreneur Edie Mars has “sidelines” of questionable legality—“black mail, bent cars, hideouts for hot boys from the east, and so on” (714)—in *Farewell My Lovely*, “all rackets tie together” (955);⁶ and as the business brains converge and the criminal networks become indistinguishable from the social, political and legal institutions into which they are imbricated, the process accelerates.

The organization thus comes in Chandler’s later fiction to stand in its extremity for the structuring effects of time, so that when in the very last Marlowe story—which is about the

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973).

⁵ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep, Stories and Early Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1995).

⁶ Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely, Stories and Early Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1995).

refinement of the Syndicate's "technique" of killing—Marlowe's realization that the administrative mechanism is "perfect all the time" bears a kind of anagogical weight to it: the death process is not just reliable in its technique but also eternal in its form (1233, 1267). I'll address this story, "The Pencil," in greater detail subsequently; but what it finally makes explicit, in a much more self-conscious way than the other Marlowe stories and novels do, is the extent to which time in Chandler's fiction is programmatically externalized—and the extent to which this creates problems of characterization for a hero whose movements must be organized in a way that, on some basic level, oppose organization and technical perfection.

In the earlier works this is vaguely evident in the discomfiting way, for instance, that Marlowe's narration conveys a sense of perpetual presence—that, beyond his role of facilitating the conventional presentifying function of narrative retrospection, Marlowe literally doesn't seem to age (even if he does seem to have memories of things having happened to him before). This general impression finds validation in Chandler's own impression of his character. In a 1951 letter addressed to D.J. Ibberson, he speculates on the topic: "The date of his [Marlowe's] birth is uncertain. I think he said somewhere that he was thirty-eight years old, but that was quite a while ago and he is no older today" (quoted in *Chandler Speaking*, 227).⁷

This should in theory make Marlowe's mode of narration schematically coherent with a representation of society that is based on a rigid typology, a re-enactment space in which the play of action is exaggerated in its seriality and to which the same figures eternally return. But in practice, Marlowe's style of narration tends persistently to cut against the typology it instantiates, so that through a somewhat more paradoxical recursion the types *themselves* seem to develop and progress from novel to novel, whereas Marlowe does not. In other words, everyone and

⁷ Raymond Chandler, *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, edited by Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

everything in the Marlowe novels tend to become more and more like the sorts of persons or things that they are—except Marlowe, whose days (as he puts in in *The Long Goodbye*) are “not exactly...typical” of days in the lives of hardboiled detectives, “but not totally untypical either” (549).⁸

While I mean to argue here that this is primarily an effect of how time is conceptualized and formalized in Chandler’s novels, it does invite alternate biographical and literary-historical explanations. Early scholars of Chandler, always anxious about whether they were studying works of authentic literary genius and originality or just generic refinements of a popular American style of low-brow entertainment, tended to make much of the fact that Chandler was born in Chicago but was raised and educated in England before returning stateside, and that he fought with the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the first World War. This line of criticism originates with Chandler’s eminently quotable assessment of himself as a “man without a country”—and in this way echoes the line of Greene scholarship alluded to earlier, which takes as its starting point Greene’s sense of himself as an artist preeminently concerned with paradoxes of loyalty (*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, 25). The image of Chandler as torn in his fidelities between two nations and two traditions offers a preliminary but only speculative explanation of the conceptually awkward notion that, as R.W. Lid puts it, “Chandler’s studied American-ness produced an authentic American voice” (161).⁹ In a much more recent analysis of Chandler’s fiction in relation to the American *noir* tradition, Erik Dussere still frames this paradox in terms of the author’s disavowal of a British tradition; but for Dussere, Chandler’s style—what he calls “the Chandler effect”—is distinct not for its authenticity but for its “linguistic performance of

⁸ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye, Later Novels and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995).

⁹ R.W. Lid, “Philip Marlowe Speaking,” *The Critical Response to Raymond Chandler*, edited by J.K. Van Dover (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 43-63.

authenticity,” an “authenticity effect” that is different from a “reality effect,” in Barthes’s sense, because it makes itself visible *as* an effect (15-21).¹⁰

Dussere refers to the reflexive quality of Chandler’s famous similes to make this case; but, though it is inflected with a postmodern critical sensibility, the claim is structurally identical to Lid’s. Itself a kind of simile, the “Chandler effect” substitutes the effect of “American-ness” with the effect of, to quote a term Dussere himself puts in scare quotes, ““effect-ness”” (21). Critical recursions like this can help highlight aesthetic problems and paradoxes in suggestive ways—another example that comes to mind is Fredric Jameson’s decades-long project of detecting in Chandler the effect of an unimaginable social “totality”; but piling up scare quotes, emptying out the terms of analysis, also is a practice that tends to invert the frame of reference, reproducing rather than comprehending the figurative process it means to undermine. For Jameson (not unlike Bowen), this approach eventually runs him all the way out to a stunning confrontation with the “end of the world,” the “void,” the “non-human space,” which is the “ultimate secret of the Chandlerian narrative” (86).¹¹

In what, exactly, does this non-human space consist? The central premise of this chapter is that it takes shape as the accidental effect of some fairly basic decisions that Chandler made about how to organize the temporal situation of his narrator. These creative decisions result—inevitably, it seems—in a series of slight imperfections and inconsistencies, peculiar “lapses and cracks” in the novels’ formal strategies of generating suspense. These are difficult to notice—thus the feeling of secrecy, of something hidden “behind the story”; so part of the task here will be simply to enumerate them and to dispel some of the interpretative vagueness they tend to provoke. But the bigger challenge is to examine the governing assumptions and beliefs about

¹⁰ Erik Dussere, *America Is Elsewhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 112-7.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (New York: Verso, 2016)

time that make such trivial little aesthetic lapses and peculiarities seem so readily assimilable to vast eschatological mysteries that have little to do with the mysteries at hand.

This must be due in part to the fact that Chandler's novels concern themselves thematically with over-sized existential things like big sleeps and long goodbyes. But their effect of sublime inhumanity is formal in a stricter sense; it arises out of the logical incommensurability of, on the one hand, the ways in which suspense generally operates as a mode of anticipation, and, on the other, the impression that Chandler's literary practice is based on a typological scheme that is extreme in its recursiveness: in a world of near-perfect similitude and continuity, where everything always seems to be just like the sort of thing that it is, how can recognition be delayed and what could there possibly be to look forward to?

II. VOICEOVER AND THE BLINDED IMAGE OF PERCEPTION

This temporal aporia forms the basis of the two most commonplace critical assumptions about Chandler's detective novels—assumptions which have developed with such consistency over time that their basic contradiction has mostly evaded detection. On the one hand, following a series of famous interpretations by W.H. Auden, Gertrude Stein, and, later, Fredric Jameson (among others), the novels are seen to be distinct for their intensely episodic character—for a style of realism that, in its emphasis on discrete scenic details and autonomous impressions, refutes the strong drive toward narrative continuity that justifies the elaborate hermeneutic contrivances of the British tradition.¹² On the other hand, Chandler's prose is often taken for

¹² See W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1948 and Gertrude Stein, "Why I Like Detective Stories," *Gertrude Stein: A Study of the Short Fiction*, edited by Linda S. Watts (Woodbridge: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 102-106. Jameson has written a number of essays on Chandler over the years, which have been recently collected as *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (New York: Verso, 2016).

granted as the closest literary analog to the amplified form of first person retrospection commonly associated with the voiceovers of American *film noir*—a dramatic technique that depends for its fatalistic effect on an extreme sense of narrative continuity, one that is figured iconically in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) as a train headed “straight down the line” with no stops until the cemetery (or, as in the posthumous narration of Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1951), no stop there either).¹³

Never is this antinomy clearer, perhaps, than in Robert Montgomery’s 1946 film adaptation of *The Lady in the Lake*, a *film noir* that is somewhat famous as one of the most original experiments in cinematographic point of view in the history of mainstream Hollywood production.¹⁴ This chapter will focus primarily on Chandler’s novels rather than on his contribution to the *noir* tradition in Hollywood, but this film is worth examining up front as a cinematic exposition of Chandler’s style that magnifies the conceptual problems inherent in analogies between novelistic narration and cinematic voiceover, which that style seems to invite.

In his debut as a director, Montgomery decided to use Chandler’s novel to make a film shot almost entirely from the optical point of view of the main character—that is, the image on screen would never cut away from the visual perspective of the detective Phillip Marlowe, played by Montgomery himself. This technique amplifies the emphasis of Chandler’s prose on immediate perceptual impressions while at the same time exaggerating the narratorial quality of the cinematographic image by, in effect, identifying it with the voice-over. In other words, the technique literalizes the tired pun that suggests an equivalence between the camera “eye” and the “I” of narrative fiction. The optical point of view had in more limited ways been utilized before,

¹³ Chandler wrote the screenplay for *Double Indemnity* based on James M. Cain’s 1943 novel of the same name.

¹⁴ *Lady in the Lake*, dir. by Robert Montgomery, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, Warner Home Video, 2006, DVD.

both in avant-garde and mainstream Hollywood films. But this was the first attempt to make it the central aesthetic premise of a feature length film, and it is thus a precursor to the now very popular found-footage genre—and, more suggestively perhaps, to the unique forms of identification generated in the aesthetic convergence of found-footage films and first-person shooter video games, as seen for instance in Ilya Naishuller’s *Hardcore Henry* (2015) (Figures 3.2 and 3.3).¹⁵



Figure 3.2: Marlowe’s POV.



Figure 3.3: Henry’s POV.

Montgomery’s formal gambit requires an elaborate set of framing devices to justify its novel technique. As I will discuss in subsequent sections, a significant but rarely remarked feature of Chandler’s novels is that, while they are written in the first person and utilize a more or less conventional form of narrative retrospection, they consistently obscure the source and temporal situation of the narration; that is, there’s no scene of storytelling, no moment when Marlowe sits down at a typewriter to recount his latest case, no cues that what we’re reading is a journal, a log, a transcript of a hearing, etc. Thus, in a profound and programmatic way, the

¹⁵ Scholarship focused on the relationship between video game and cinematic point of view is relatively limited and falls outside the scope of this dissertation; but for a brief and interesting overview of some of the main convergences and divergences of these forms, see Will Brooker, “In Focus: Moving Between Platforms: Film, Television, Gaming, and Convergence: Camera-Eye, CG-Eye: Videogames and the ‘Cinematic,’” *Cinema Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3 (Spring 2009):122–28. See also Jamie M. Poster, “Looking and Acting in Computer Games: Cinematic ‘Play’ and New Media Interactivity,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 24 no. 4 (July 2007): 325-339.

novels refuse to conceptualize Marlowe in terms of a point of view, at least insofar as point of view entails some sort of position—minimally a spatial position but usually a temporal one as well—to justify the mode or attitude in which the narration is presented.

The film corrects this formal elision by opening with an objective shot of Montgomery as Marlowe sitting behind a desk, addressing the audience directly in order to introduce the story in retrospect. This amounts to a sort of double cameo, since the point of view of the majority of the film must visually exclude Marlowe (except when he passes in front of an occasional mirror); that is, the director appears on the wrong side of the camera as Marlowe appearing on the wrong side of the camera to play what amounts to a cameo role as himself. Facing the camera, he explains among other things that “this ‘Lady in the Lake’ business started just three days before Christmas,” when, tired of being a detective, he had decided to write a story about being one instead. The scene thus seems to present the most conventional sort of set up for a whodunit type detective story. In Todorov’s classic analysis of the forms of detective fiction, whodunits tend in just this way to present two stories at once: the first story is about a crime that has been committed; the second story *reconstructs* the story of the crime as a book about the culprit’s detection and makes its authorship explicit.¹⁶

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov. “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 42-52. This scheme seems so deeply antithetical to Chandler’s sensibilities that Silver and Ward reasonably presume that this was a modification of Steve Fishers, who wrote the final version of the script and was (like Chandler) a veterans writer for the pulp magazine *Black Mask*. See *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (New York: The Overlook Press), 166. But, reviewing an early manuscript, Gene Phillips confirms that Chandler himself had transformed Marlowe into a writer for this film—even before knowing Montgomery’s plan for filming. He had even written some scenes of his own to be shot from the subjective point of view, but ultimately he disapproved of Montgomery’s decision to shoot the whole picture in this manner. See *Creatures of Darkness: Raymond Chandler, Detective Fiction, and Film Noir* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), 105-116.

Though Marlowe's introductory exposition sets up the expectation that the movie will proceed to recount the origin and development of a story called "The Lady in the Lake," this expectation is confounded once the film shifts to the subjective point of view: the next scene depicts Marlowe entering the office of a pulp magazine publisher to discuss the publication of a detective story that he's *already written*. The Mobius-strip-like impression of the temporal origin of the narration is underscored by the title of the story in question—"If I should Die Before I Live"—and the subjective orientation is thus disrupted from the outset in a way that, despite the ostensive presentifying function of the optical point of view, the whole film proceeds in a way that seems both proleptic and analeptic at once.

The setup is made even more complicated when, in Marlowe/Montgomery's initiatory statement, the audience is directed to participate in the reenactment of *both* stories. "Right now, you're reading in your newspapers and hearing over your radios about a murder," says Marlowe. "What you've read and what you've heard is one thing. The real thing is something else. There's only one guy who knows that. I know it." He continues:

You'll meet the people. You'll find the clues. And maybe you'll solve it quick,
and maybe you won't...But let me give you a tip. You've got to watch them.
You've got to watch them all the time, because things happen when you least
expect them.

The dramatic tension of the film is thus built up around both a clashing of media (what is heard vs. what is read vs. what is watched) and a compounding of subjectivity (this "one guy" incorporates the "I" of the character and the "I" of the director and the "I" of the writer and "I" of the viewer, and maybe the "I" of the camera too); and its structure of suspense is built up around

what turns out to be a very complex conflict of identification: the viewer's experience is supposed to be perceptually correlated with Marlowe's but temporally distinct from it.

If, in the Hitchcockian model, suspense derives from viewers knowing in advance more about *what* things will happen than the characters do—but without knowing *when*—here, the tension is internalized in a different way. It derives instead from a more or less autonomous race towards knowledge: we are supposed to share Marlowe's visual impressions and the mode of concentrated anticipation characteristic of his profession, but we should expect to be surprised by our *own* mental faculties, not his, as solutions will leap out from the screen of perception just when we least expect them to.

Or to put it another way, with a metaphor often used to describe mystery stories: the viewer and the detective are trapped in an epistemological labyrinth—in this case forced to take the same path at the same pace but somehow find different exits. The process seems primed for failure in that its promise of participatory autonomy is premised on its incompatible promise of experiential solidarity and generic continuity. The situation is perhaps best summarized by the film's tag line: "YOU and ROBERT MONTGOMERY solve a murder mystery together!" And indeed, its novelty value notwithstanding, *The Lady in the Lake* is generally regarded as an unsuccessful film, a promising concept that gets tedious after a few gags: a panning shot to simulate Marlowe's distracted gaze as he ogles a secretary walking in and out of the room, a tracking shot to a close-up of a backward-tilting face to show an impending kiss (figure 3.4), a tremor then a tilt then a blur then a fade to black to indicate a knock-out punch, and so forth. For Pascal Bonitzer, the aesthetic error of this film—and the more general error of films that mistake the cinematic point of view for the "I" of narrative fiction—comes from forgetting that the camera is not "subjective" in its own right, that it is instead constitutive of a process of subjective

identification. In this psychoanalytic view, the reverse shot (which Montgomery's film prohibits) is necessary: the spectator must see the hero's face from the point of view of the "Other" (58).¹⁷

In Bonitzer's view, the film's continual failure to allow for identification is on one level just simply annoying and tedious—but this annoyance derives from a formal imperfection that seems to have more far-reaching aesthetic implications. In relegating Marlowe to off-screen space—the space of horror, as Bonitzer notes—*The Lady in the Lake* in effect produces a massive blind spot in the place of the subject: where "YOU" have been led to expect a novel form of sympathetic involvement, you experience instead a "core of absolute inhumanity" (to borrow again Bowen's phrase); and to the extent that this core is mobile, it expands the epistemic reach of a labyrinth that, though it may have a generically determinate end (i.e. a solution), has no referential origin. As Marlowe goes about solving the mystery, everything on screen that can be taken to be an object of perception (and so, in this genre, a source of knowledge) indicates that perception always happens elsewhere and at some other time. By virtue of a technique whose special feature is to offer a continuous stream of experiential access to the scene of the crime—a live feed, as it were—the film winds up doing the opposite, producing a "locked room" type whodunit, except that the viewer, like everyone else, is locked out of it.

¹⁷ Pascal Bonitzer, "Partial Vision, Film and the Labyrinth," trans. Fabrice Ziolkowski, *Wide Angle*, no. 4, pp. 56-63. First published in *Cahiers du Cinema*, no. 301 (1979).

It's hard to guess how much Montgomery was aware of the problems of identification and of temporality raised by his decision to film *The Lady in the Lake* in this manner—or of how these problems relate to Chandler's own decisions about how to situate his narrator. But a few brief moments—where the gimmick is most pronounced in its errors—suggest that maybe he was. At one point, for instance, Marlowe is speaking on the phone and the blurry shape of its handset takes over the foreground of the point of view shot (figure 3.5). The semiotic cue is clear enough: as a viewer, I'm supposed to take this as a visual indication that I should imagine that *I* am Marlowe speaking. But the exaggerated implausibility of the notion that the microphone component of the handset would obtrude into the field of vision in this manner seems to offer an ironic commentary on the general awkwardness of a technique that conflates the voice with a cinematographic image of perception—as if Marlowe's voice were projected directly from the “eye” of the camera into the microphone as proxy for both the “I” and the “eye” of the viewer. It's hard to take this as anything but a reflexive gag (albeit a complicated one).



Figure 3.4: Tracking to a kiss.



Figure 3.5: Looking/speaking into the handset.

In another scene marred by an error of perception, Marlowe visits the home of Chris Lavery, a gigolo type who is implicated in the disappearance of Mrs. Kingsby (the titular “lady”) but is eliminated as a suspect when he becomes the victim of a murder himself. During the course of the interview, Marlowe offends Lavery, who, distracting Marlowe by asking for the time, puts on brass knuckles and punches him out cold. To simulate Marlowe’s turn toward the mantel clock, the camera quickly pans ninety degrees to the right, thereby catching a reverse image of the whole scene in a large mirror on the wall behind the mantel (figure 3.6). Typically in this film, wherever mirrors show up as props, these are used to allow Montgomery to appear visually as Marlowe—to simulate a reverse shot in order to accent a performance that is otherwise strictly oral. But, in this case, no one appears as Marlowe: Lavery gets ready to swing at nothing; and when the camera pans back to face the attacker, the closeness of the shot verifies in retrospect that the mirror had indeed reflected an empty space where Marlowe should have been visible (figure 3.7).



Figure 3.6: Setting up to punch no one.



Figure 3.7: Punching Marlowe.

As with Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1949), which was billed as one, long, continuous shot (but which was actually several shots cut together in ingenious ways), the production crew on *The Lady in the Lake* devised all sorts of ways to manage the pitfalls of the self-imposed technical limitation of the film—i.e. concealing cuts, hiding production equipment, blocking elaborate

movements around a camera that must always be in the middle of the set as though it were a character. So there's no *technical* reason for Marlowe to vanish like this—and there's diegetic reason for him *not* to—which makes it somewhat difficult to write this off as a mistake. And the sense that it is not a mistake is underscored by the odd symmetry of this breach of spatial continuity with another one in the scene. When Marlowe first enters Lavery's home, the camera pans ninety degrees to the left—also framing an image of a clock—and as Marlowe remarks, “Nice place you’ve got here,” the camera quickly pans ninety degrees back to the right again, creating a distraction meant to conceal a cut. On the other side of this cut, the entire spatial layout of the Lavery's place has changed. The change is dramatic—a doorway, prominently filmed a moment before, has vanished, and so apparently has an entire room—but the change is hard to notice because of the disorienting effect of the quick pan. Once both anomalies are spotted, though, they have the odd combined effect of suggesting that it is the camera's confrontation with the clock in each case that has instigated the distortion of space—the reconfiguration of the labyrinth—and that the film's visual lapses and inconsistencies are perhaps symptomatic of its deeper conflicts of synchrony.

This little mystery of the missing Marlowe actually seems to rehearse a similar (if equally obscure) vanishing act in the novel on which the film was based. When, in Chandler's version, Marlowe returns to Lavery's home a second time, the narrowed perceptual intensity of the narration implies (even before he has seen Lavery's bullet-ridden corpse in the bathroom) that the home is now a crime scene:

Face powder was spilled around on the dressing table. There was a smear of dark lipstick on a towel hanging over the waste basket. On the bed were pillows side by side, with depressions in them that could have been made by heads. A

woman's handkerchief peeped from under one pillow. A pair of sheer black pajamas lay across the foot of the bed. A rather too emphatic trace of chypre hung in the air...

I turned around and looked at myself in the long mirror of a closet door. The door was painted white and had a crystal knob. I turned the knob in my handkerchief and looked inside. The cedar-lined closet was fairly full of man's clothes. (86)¹⁸

In what could be called the literary equivalent of André Bazin's door-knob effect—a close-up image of what is “less a fact than a sign brought into arbitrary relief by the camera”¹⁹—the detailed visual enumeration of the scene cuts away right when it should begin to enumerate the visual details of Marlowe's face and body in the “long mirror” in front of him. The whiteout of the white painted door and the distractions of the crystal knob and handkerchief facilitates Marlowe's sudden disappearance from the scene, his substitution for an image of empty clothes. And the general form of “man's clothes” here—neither indefinitely *a* man's clothes nor definitely *the* man's clothes—suggests that Marlowe might as well be subsumed into the same process of elimination as everyone else who has disappeared from this scene of sheer evidentiality—pajamas lying deflated on the bed, hollow recesses in pillows—the sorts of things that could contain humans but in these cases don't.

In a 1949 fragment called “Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel,” Chandler admits that there is a certain dishonesty intrinsic to first-person narration:

¹⁸ Raymond Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake, Later Novels and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995).

¹⁹ André Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*, translated by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 37.

There must come a time when...the detective suddenly stops thinking out loud and ever so gently closes the door of his mind in the reader's face. Back in the days when the audience was still innocent and had to be hit in the face with a stale flounder in order to realize that something was fishy, the detective used to do this by saying, for example: 'Well, there are all the facts. If you give them your careful attention, I am sure your thoughts will be rich with possible explanations of these strange events.' Nowadays it is done with less parade, but the effect of a closing door is just as unmistakable. (*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, 68)

The effect Chandler describes here (though he obviously doesn't put it this way) derives from a technical shift from direct discourse to free indirect discourse: though the narration remains in the first person, there are moments of artificial disharmony between the understanding "I" and the free-playing one, so to speak. It is precisely this sense of the wavering continuity and homogeneity of Marlowe's narration that Montgomery's film intensifies. The heavy-handed compounding of "one guy" produces an aesthetic tension that tends to be more alienating in the film than it is engaging; but in those brief moments where this becomes extreme enough to give up the game, it provides a sideways glance—a kind of visual transcription—of the faltering temporal structure of the Marlowe novels, which otherwise remains obscure.²⁰

²⁰ This, in a way, makes the film an ideal translation of Chandler's prose in Walter Benjamin's sense: its excessive literalness succeeds precisely where it fails, at least insofar as it brings to light the general communicative inadequacy and fragmentary nature of *both* versions. Jameson makes a similar point in commenting on Robert Altman's famously unfaithful film version of *The Long Goodbye* (1974). He sees its failure of translation as exemplary of a process that preserves the autonomy of each form—the novel and the movie each reveals what it is capable of communicating that the other is not (*Detections of Totality*, 53). But to make this point, Jameson somewhat obscures Benjamin's prominent discussion in "The Task of the Translator" of "pure language," which at its core is eschatological and concerned (as Benjamin's ideal translator should be) with the end of communication not its preservation. It is the essential freedom of Benjamin's translator to feel unburdened by such "abysses" of incommunicability in his *own* language—its gaps and alternate dimensions—by closely adhering to the schematic structure of the original, preserving the syntax of each sentence while changing only the words. See Walter Benjamin,

This temporal variance is signaled in the most important line of dialogue in the film version of the scene in Lavery's home: "Mr. Marlowe" says Lavery at one point, "A gentleman never speaks disrespectfully of a lady, not even one as lovely as Mrs Kingsby was"—a slip of the tongue, which he corrects with emphasis: "lovely as Mrs. Kingsby *is*." This of course is a clue, just the sort of little detail to which Montgomery's audience is supposed to attend. Marlowe hears the mistake and asks Lavery about it; but since he (Marlowe) doesn't say out loud what he's made of it, or what he's made of Lavery's facial expressions as he retracts his error, we have no way to synchronize our understanding of the scenario with that of the professional detective (the effect of a closing door, here, is indeed unmistakable). And this is not merely a gimmick. The gap here between the visible and audible content of the scene and the director's voice, as such, rehearses the foundational narrative conflict of the novel, whose first line expresses the same asynchrony in terms of a kind of glitch in the scenic presentation of Los Angeles: "The Treloar Building *was, and is*, on Olive street, near sixth"—an asynchrony that, along with the name of the building, alters the temporal situation of the short story on which in turn the novel was based, and which seems to have a firmer hold on the present: "The Avenent Building *is* on Olive street, near sixth" (*The Lady in the Lake*, 3; "The Lady in the Lake," 897; emphasis added).

If, in ways emphasized by the film, Chandler's prose tends to dramatize the sudden but "gentle" recession and closing off of the conceptual schemes that support the detective's thoughts—the subtle intensification of the scenic present, of the free play of attention—it can (unlike *any* film) also oscillate in the other direction, so that the organizing structure of the

"The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 69-82.

detective's mind is held in relief but emptied of immediate perceptual content. This is figured by the opening of Lavery's closet and the sharp delimitation in that scene of the kinds of things that could contain things but don't—or figured most pointedly perhaps in *The Long Goodbye*, when Marlowe spends nearly two pages categorizing types of blondes only finally to declare Mrs. Wade visually “unclassifiable,” leaving her image almost as blank as the notorious blank page in *Tristram Shandy*, where readers are directed to their own minds to imagine the concupiscible widow Wadman: she was “none of these,” says Marlowe, “not even of that kind of world” (Chandler 491-2).

III. PROSPECTS

And, indeed, it is the organization of sexual desire that ultimately poses the most formidable aesthetic challenge to Marlowe's mode of narration. It seems to be an almost inevitable feature of the strong narrative drive entailed by the retrospection in Montgomery's film that, in the end, Marlowe ends up falling into a conventional romantic union with the film's female lead (Adrienne Fromsett, played by Audrey Totter). (That she is also his publisher is perhaps the inevitable feature of his deciding to become a writer instead of a detective.) Though Chandler himself wrote this into the original script, it stands in sharp contrast to how Marlowe is generally characterized as the consummate non-consummatory hero. Chandler himself makes this point in terms that are clear enough in his “Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel” (cited above):

Love interest nearly always weakens a mystery because it introduces a type of suspense that is antagonistic to the detective's struggle to solve the problem...The only effective kind of love interest is that which creates a personal hazard for the

detective—but which at the same time you instinctively feel to be a mere episode.

A really good detective never gets married. (*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, 70)

But by what instinct do episodes make themselves apparent as episodes? The idea sounds simple in theory, but produces bizarre results in practice. A case in point from *The Lady in The Lake*: “Her upper lip curled a little. It was a long upper lip. I like long upper lips”; then, a few paragraphs later: “I stood up and tapped on the edge of the desk looking down at her. She had a lovely neck”; and then: “I ran a finger along the edge of the desk and looked at her sideways. Pale ivory skin, dark lovely eyes”; and finally: “her...lips parted, waiting for more fun”—but of course: “I didn’t have any more. I went out” (102-6). Such leering is not out of character for Marlowe, who is a chronic leerer, but it nevertheless obtrudes on the narrative—not because the behavior might be vulgar to some and frustrating to others, but because it is unmotivated. It outlines a structure of impulses empty of any governing principle, and it suggests a scheme of perceptual organization directed by nothing, voided of goals or prospects. One can’t really be sure what *loveliness* and *likeability* even entail for Marlowe as he glares at these particular body parts; they certainly aren’t expressions of *taste*: they don’t include the reader, Hemingway-like, in a society of connoisseurs, those in the know about long upper lips. “I went out” is not only a misanthropic withdrawal but a thoroughgoing subjective evacuation, the narrator’s default operation, especially when women are involved: “Overhead the rain still pounded, with a remote sound, as if it was somebody else’s rain” (*The Big Sleep* 733); “No feelings at all was exactly right. I was as hollow and empty as the spaces between the stars” (*The Long Goodbye* 645); “Hold it, Marlowe, you’re not human tonight... You’re not human tonight, Marlowe... You’re not human tonight, Marlowe... You’re not human tonight, Marlowe... You’ve got the wrong

attitude, Marlowe. You're not human tonight" (*The Little Sister* 268-9); "I wasn't even there" (*The Little Sister* 329).

Marlowe's transient, incoherent romantic compulsions might elicit a number of critical attitudes: skepticism towards the absurd chivalric idealism of a modern knight-errant, unease with the character's implausible prudishness and deep-rooted misogyny, suspicions of a suppressed homoeroticism; but, in a more comprehensive sense, the dissolution of Marlowe's proclivities correlates with a general agreement among readers—from Stein to Auden to Jameson to just about any fan of the genre—that, ultimately, no one cares what happens in a Raymond Chandler novel.²¹ Why this might be *is* a matter of taste, but the almost unfaltering consensus raises a more fundamental question about narrative temporality and its forms of anticipation: how can the *promise of unfulfillment* constitute a form of engagement? What can compel narration if its subject is a "hollow" figure that can be neither prospectively nor retrospectively filled?

According to a theory of suspense based, like Bonitzer's, on delayed or disrupted subjective identification—or of recognition, in the Lacanian sense—suspense in Chandler would seem impossible. In the note cited above, Chandler himself describes suspense in terms that are something like a reverse eroticism, the opposite of Bonitzer's well-known analysis, for instance,

²¹ The point is asserted bluntly here to bring the topic into focus, but it should stir no controversy to say that, in some profound sense, *solutions* have lost their appeal in the sort of mysteries for which Chandler is famous; and thus, since readers are no longer lured prospectively towards finales, their interests and attentions are redistributed throughout the course of narration in new and unusual ways. In modern detective fiction, Stein finds something "soothing" about the fact that the hero (for her, the corpse) is already dead and that "nobody really believes in detection." This means that "your mind [is] free to enjoy yourself." For her, the best detective stories have no detection at all ("Why I like detective stories" 104-5). For Auden, the important question in Chandler is not *what* happens or *why*, in terms characterological motivation, but rather *where* it happen. Auden finds "serious" artistry in the explication of a "criminal milieu," the study of "the Great Wrong Place," but has no interest in Chandler's narrative diversions, the process of detection or its solutions (408). For Jameson, the pleasure of Chandler is found not in reading but in re-reading, in which case the endings have no draw (57).

of how suspense operates in Hitchcock. For Bonitzer (recalling his essay “Hitchcockian Suspense”) tension derives from the sudden or gradual introjection of a perversion or “stain” into the harmonious organization of a scene—a “hazard” (to use Chandler’s word) that threatens the sense of a natural order. This “stain,” the visual impression that something is wrong, unnatural or out of place, makes the formation of a romantic couple strained or uneasy in a way that demands resolution (i.e. a “happy ending”).²² In Chandler, on the other hand, there seems to be a kind of ground-tone or vague background of perversion and presumed romantic tension and uneasiness that draws Marlowe on, and suspense derives from the way in which (however precariously) the episodes are organized and stabilized *against* this background.

The success of this mode of suspense is evident in the way that fleeting but distinctly structured scenic impressions dominate the reader’s attention and memory—this type of scene, this type of place, this type of dialogue, this type of character—to such an extent that the accrual of anything like an overarching narrative becomes tenuous, if not impossible. Such impressions uphold the prevailing image of Chandler at work: not a storyteller, but rather a pulpist pounding feeble filaments of plot together out of vivid fragments of recycled material. This type of suspense is effective, in other words, where there seems to be no stabilizing aesthetic principle of time or well-defined sense of temporal counterpoint against which any given episode quite makes sense as an episode—in the term’s root meaning of an *entering into* or *coming in besides* (for what are these episodes *in* exactly, if not a series of novels in more than a nominal sense?).

Jameson has made the clearest and most enduring case for the de-narrativization of Chandler by describing a practice he calls “synoptic” re-reading, wherein each “micro-episode” is subject to a process of formal autonomization (57-87). I’ve begun in this chapter to argue that

²² Pascal Bonitzer, “Hitchcockian Suspense,” *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (but were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, edited by Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1992), 15-30

there is a significant countervailing aesthetic principle at work in the novels; but even an anecdotal assertion (which will provoke controversy from none but the most eccentric fans) might suffice to call the premise of a dissoluble Chandler into question—namely, that the novels are better than the short stories, they are more pleasurable to read, and they have been a much more durable source of textual engagement, critical and otherwise.²³ This is to some extent attributable to the author’s maturity, to the refinement of a specific style of scenic compilation; but the degree to which forms of engagement and suspense obtain on a larger scale in Chandler goes beyond what Jameson sees as an essentially modernist practice “in which seams and transitions constitute the truest locus of aesthetic production” (59).

In other words, the Marlowe novels contain latent prospects—slight correctives, one could say, to what Lukács calls the modernist “attenuation of reality,” the dissolution of personality and loss of narrative perspective which reach their nightmarish extreme in *Molloy* (1951), Beckett’s version of the detective novel.²⁴ As the following sections will show, this alternate mode of engagement derives from a subtle—and often, it seems, accidental—interplay between the rigorous temporal immediacy of Chandler’s prose and the development, as his novels progress into the postwar period, of an ulterior form of temporality, a figural counterpoint through which the details of familiar episodes shift and cohere in unexpected ways. To be sure, Chandler’s “hollow” man has something in common with T.S. Eliot’s, his vacant sexuality coming off as a “paralyzed force, gesture without motion”—until, that is, it reaches its points of sudden aesthetic exhaustion and failure, moments in which it reveals an edifice of narrative suspense that seems as strange and inhuman in Chandler as it is perfectly conventional.

²³ Chandler himself felt that books rather than short stories were his “natural element,” and at the height of his career he went 20 years without writing a Marlowe story. See “Introductory Note” to “The Pencil,” cited above (1233).

²⁴ See Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism” in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (17-46).

IV. THE SECOND MARLOWE

Knocked cold by a hatchet man with a fistful of nickels, possibly drugged, “trussed like a turkey ready for the oven,” Marlowe slowly regains consciousness in the midst of one of the most subtly peculiar scenes in all of Chandler’s novels. The figure of a woman—Mona Mars, missing wife of the gangster Eddie Mars—slowly coalesces piece by piece before him with a kind of hallucinatory, technicolor vividness, the we’re-not-in-Kansas-anymore effect held in relief against the detective’s parallel encounter, a few chapters before, with the wealthy widow Vivian Regan. Where Regan lounges monochromatically in her “modernistic” chaise—black eyes, black hair, ivory drapes, white carpet, ivory pillow, a vague, colorless drink in hand, with mirrors and chromium and crystals to compound the effect—Mars emerges before Marlowe with eyes “the blue of mountain lakes,” hair “like a silver fruit bowl,” wearing a “green knitted dress,” wielding a “sharp-angled glossy bag” and “a glass of amber fluid” (*The Big Sleep* 599-600, 733). Mona sends a perceptual shock wave through Marlowe’s typology of the female form, her cartoonish figure drawn out part by part as his attention shuffles systematically among a narrow range of kinds of objects and body parts that he’s described before, retaining certain details, altering or adding others, straining to incorporate her into a representational standard.

As suggested in the previous section, this sort of iterative and fragmentary rendering of character is emblematic of Chandler’s style and is central to how critics have read Chandler for decades. “So it is that little by little,” writes Jameson, “we begin to collect these episode types...: we juxtapose Harry Jones and George Anson Philips (inept private detectives); or Laird Brunette and Eddie Mars or Alex Morny (likeable mobsters); or Vannier, Marriot or Lavery (quintessential gigolos)—and a new kind of stereoscopic reading emerges in which each scene

retains its sharpness in our eye but designates a well-nigh Platonic (yet social-typological) unit behind it that the reading eye can no longer see as such but only intuit" (58). Yet, in the case of Mona Mars (juxtaposed with Vivian Regan, the mobster's wives), such a figural intuition would be strained to its breaking point, a break that is registered in the narration as a perceptual dissociation: "Overhead the rain still pounded, with a remote sound, as if it was somebody else's rain"—a dissociation that gives way, once Mona speaks, to a narrational quandary that is rare and remarkable in Chandler's body of work: "'How do you feel?' It was a smooth silvery voice that matched her hair. It had a tiny tinkle in it, like bells in a doll's house. I thought that was silly as soon as I thought it" (733). As the simile takes shape, its poesis is almost explicit: the alliterative phrasing facilitates a synesthetic transition as the rhythm tends towards a perfect—if perfectly obscure—amphibrachic meter.

Is Marlowe a poet? To be sure, there's a certain absurdity in posing this question (not to mention subjecting hard-boiled prose to prosodic analysis)²⁵; but this momentary formal tic, hidden here at the very beginning of Chandler's career as a novelist, suggests the obscure presence of an ulterior figure, one coeval with that more familiar form of literary subjectivity—the proverbial private "I"—which orients the 20th-century detective story. In an instant—"I thought that was silly as soon as I thought it"—there are two more or less distinct Marlowes: one we can readily recognize as that nominal figure under which the myriad experiences of the narrating "I" of all of Chandler's novels are unified; but the other, whom we've never heard from before and will rarely hear from again, composes those experiences to be written down, mulls over the language latent in the other Marlowe's thoughts, thinks about the silliness of his simile while the other thinks about the silliness of the correlated thought.

²⁵ It should be recalled, however, that while living in London in his youth, Chandler began his literary career as a poet. His poetry is generally marked by fastidious metrical regularity.

We can thus briefly glimpse how Chandler strains to consolidate the dual narrative structure of classical detective fiction—detective plus an intervening assistant/author—into the first person, cleaving what Todorov characterizes as the story that “ignores the book completely” and the story that is “the story of that very book” (45). The result is a fairly profound blind spot at the center of how Chandler’s aesthetic innovations, and their literary and cinematic legacies, have been approached critically: Who actually narrates Chandler’s novels? Why doesn’t *that* voice sound *quite* the same as the voice it represents in dialogue as Marlowe’s own? What is its existential character? When is it speaking? What motivates the use of first person?

First-person narration is of course so thoroughly conventional in the 20th century that, epistles and certain other forms notwithstanding, its use demands no diegetic motivation, *per se*; but, for one reason or another, the modes of fiction and cinema most closely associated with Raymond Chandler—hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*—programmatically *do* tend to provide this motivation and thus locate the production of narratorial subjectivity at the formal as well as thematic center of one of the more substantial generic wellsprings of mid-20th-century literature and film. Chandler was both aware of and ambivalent about the psychological and sociological resonance of the genre he was working to shape: “And if you have to have significance,” writes Chandler in a 1948 letter to James Sandoe, “it is just possible that the tensions in a novel of murder are the simplest and yet most complete pattern of the tensions on which we live in this generation” (*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, 53).

And insofar as these tensions were formalized as a ubiquitous new sort of literary “I,” the concurrent restructuration of narrative experience and modes of fictional and cinematic address really do in retrospect seem to have been synchronized with world history in some special way: one can look back from this side of World War II to see a new style, a new type of

Americanness, take shape in all its contingency as the fulfillment of certain decades-old aesthetic potentialities on both sides of the Atlantic, forced by the events of war to converge.²⁶ These form something perhaps more aptly described as a *mood* than a genre—a passing historical disposition that would expire within a decade or so but leave behind a narratorial voice that has not yet ceased to resound. Raymond Chandler bears a unique relationship to this voice, not simply because posterity has named him the most famous of its practitioners in both literature and in screenwriting, but because his novels—published between 1939 and 1958—constitute its past, present and future in both a grammatical and a literary-historical sense. Through a unique poetic synchronicity, Chandler’s work articulates a generational turn, a figural movement much more substantial than what is evident in the mere recognition of a certain tone or attitude, a certain metrical signature, insinuated throughout the dialogue of postwar American cinema.

Jameson speculates that this voice derives its unique phenomenal quality (most recognizable in the voice-overs of *film noir*) from the pervasive radio culture of the 1930s and its influence on other media; but, as suggestive as this premise might be, it leads him to conclude too readily that the voice “of the hard-boiled detective in general, and Marlowe in particular, offers a specifically radio pleasure which must be paid for by the closure of the case, and which allows the novel’s past tenses to resonate with doom and foreboding, marking the detective’s daily life with the promise of adventure” (62). However, though cases are closed, Marlowe’s

²⁶ The principal aesthetic precursors of *film noir* are widely understood to be German Expressionism (and to some extent French Poetic Realism) in cinema and American pulp and paperback crime fiction. Since this study is not centrally concerned with *film noir*, as such, the extensive bibliography of debates about the genre’s origins, definitions, and demise has been omitted. The key idea here is simply that the sense of *noir* as a style and as a subjective disposition is an ex post facto formulation that carries with it a profound historical resonance that seems as clear as it is difficult to articulate. *Noir* is decisively, if not altogether coherently, bound up with what Hayden White calls “modernist events”—the occurrence, in the 20th century, of a series of unprecedented “holocaustal” events that baffle conventional historical inquiry and that might thus be better approached by way of the technical and aesthetic innovations of modernist fiction and film (66-86).

endless abstentions confound narrative pleasure *as* pleasure and defer “the promise of adventure” to a set of generic expectations that have little to do with the detective’s *way of speaking*. What’s more—and this crucial point has been raised above and will be drawn out in the following sections—Chandler seems systematically, though with a few important exceptions, to avoid retrospection—to, in effect, obscure the temporal origin of narration and to disinvest the past tense of exactly the sort of “resonance” that Jameson expects to hear there. By and large, Marlowe’s is precisely *not* the voice of, say, Fred MacMurray, broadcast from the future to interfere with our sense of what is present, to render impressions of the *mise-en-scène* liable to the various anxieties that closure entails (guilt, fear, apprehension, and so forth).

Which is to say that Marlowe’s two discernable “I”s cannot be—and need not be—resolved by way of a temporal displacement: one Marlowe is not ‘behind’ another such that a person is filled in over time, rendered as if in stereoscopic relief by a generic, “social-typological” process of narratorial self-fashioning. Marlowe doesn’t write himself into the world (quite the opposite, as will be shown in section VII). As tempting as it always is to equate his literary “voice” with the cinematic voice-over, doing so would (among the other consequences) commit us to the unsettling, if intriguing, notion that everything that isn’t in quotes in a Chandler novel is non-diegetic—pure style.

Indeed, as Stuart Burrows has recently argued, it doesn’t quite make sense to think of Marlowe’s narrative mode as first person. For Burrows, *noir* takes form as a generic world that is correlative not just to radio, but to mass media in general and the democratization of knowledge and expertise. The mass circulation of information, the sense that “everyone knows everything”—or that, quoting Niklas Luhmann, everything “is known to be known”—results in generic exhaustion: the esotericism of the classical detective is rendered obsolete, and the

detective's social milieu is constrained to a narrow range of character types, which are always known in advance. "Every criminal—indeed, pretty much everyone—does the same thing" (52-3). Thus Marlowe's "I" can only refer to a type of person and not to a person, placing it outside of modes of direct address, which, as Burrows argues (following Emile Benveniste), marks it grammatically as a third person, as no one in particular.

For both Burrows and Jameson (but to different ends), the reader must in a way remediate *noir*'s displaced "I." For Burrows, this has to do with the novels' "proxy economy," the way they facilitate various forms of vicarious pleasure. For Jameson, this remediation happens as a result of a figural intuition that seems to require an eternal presence of mind, an impossible—if quite literally ideal—reader who, exempt from the operations of narrative suspense, comprehends all of Chandler simultaneously in order to intuit the social-historical totality that exceeds its narrative form.²⁷ But this practice tends to obscure the temporal scheme that transpires in the form of the novels themselves, the *other* narrative voice that cannot be known or identified in advance and that addresses the reader from a historical vantage quite outside that of the private eye—but that seems to appear only by accident.

V. WARTIME AND THE ACCIDENTS OF RETROSPECTION

Rarely in Chandler's novels (perhaps only once, as far as I have discovered) does Marlowe seem to *experience* history—rarely, that is, is the sort of situation one would find recorded in a history book recorded in the course of narration as a temporal phenomenon. In *The Lady in the Lake*, Marlowe finds himself in Santa Monica (thinly veiled as the fictional Bay

²⁷ Such a method was precisely the target of Eric Rabkin's early work on suspense, which sought to reorient narrative theory from the retrospective involvements of critical practice towards the prospective involvements of actual reading by re-defining suspense as form of "momentary engagement." (Rabkin, *Narrative Suspense: 'When Slim Turned Sideways...'* (1973))

City) in the office of the captain of police (a man named Webber) when, for a fleeting moment, perhaps by mistake, the narrator's usual tense—a literary past tense that is understood to represent a fictional *now*—slips into the tense of retrospection, so that all of a sudden a new dimension of past events recedes from the more familiar past tense of the novel's present: "He [Webber] walked to the window and stood looking out over the bay. This was before the dim-out went into effect, and there were many lights in the yacht harbor" (140). Taken out of context, there is nothing unusual about this passage; indeed, it assumes one of the most basic forms of classical first person narrative fiction, in which the narrator, as both character and storyteller, recounts past events with the advantage of hindsight. Yet in Chandler, where narrator and character, narration and narrative subject, are systematically hewn to a single figure, this shift amounts to a spatial and temporal distortion—a historical vertigo-effect: the "I" bends towards omniscience (Marlowe seems to see what Webber sees) and time acquires unexpected dimensionality as the events of war contravene the novel's sense of narrative presence by way of an optical discrepancy—quite literally a change of lighting.

There is perhaps a practical explanation for this breach in Chandler's standard practice—what is, in effect, a continuity error. Though it wasn't published until 1943, Chandler began working in earnest on what would become *The Lady in the Lake* in the spring of 1939, making progress through about two thirds of the novel before declaring it "dead" and abandoning the project for the next three years. It is quite plausible that the temporal glitch in this scene is an artifact of the process of reanimation, the result of Chandler revising in 1942 a scene composed in 1939 and finding it impossible to leave the fictional *now* entirely intact. The coastal "dim-out" zones went into effect for a relatively brief period in 1942, while fears of German U-boat attacks were rising, so that potential targets on land were not backlit by the headlamps of westbound car

traffic. Because the situation of narration isn't dated with enough specificity for the decision to be anything but arbitrary, an ambivalent Chandler must have paused on this scene to consider the radius, as it were, of the novel's moment: how far beyond the instant of putting pen to paper does the present extend? To sweep the present backward to the far side of the dim-outs would be an act of erasure; to extend it forward to some indefinite time beyond the end of the existential threat that the war posed to coastal U.S. cities would be presumptuous, if not unimaginable; to constrict it to the month or week or day of actual writing would be myopic. By the time the novel was published in 1943, the dim-outs had ended; yet Chandler's inability or unwillingness to resolve this question—to effect a practical synthesis of the two nightscapes—results in a kind of blemish, the mark of a slight bifurcation of history, a crack in the fictional present.

To be sure, these observations read a great deal into such a minute narratorial discrepancy; but the opening sentences of the novel are evidence enough that Chandler was deeply concerned in this particular work with how wartime activities were reshaping the physical and temporal character of southern California. The first sentence is cited above in the discussion of the film version, but the temporal slip, as it were, continues:

The Treloar building was, *and is* on Olive Street, near Sixth, on the west side. The sidewalk in front of it had been built of black and white rubber blocks. They were taking them up *now* to give to the government, and a hatless pale man with a face like a building superintendent was watching the work and looking as if it was breaking his heart (3, emphasis added).

There is an almost elegiac quality in Chandler's strained efforts to do away with retrospection yet somehow crystalize an image of the material history of Los Angeles into a fictional present, even as that image is one of transition. The excessive specificity of the first words of the novel

conveys a “reality effect” in Barthes’s sense—but as the war literally subtracts material from the city, we witness the contraction of the scene’s presence, the rationing of descriptive and figural resources: what “was” and what “had been” is stripped away from what “is” and what is taken up “now”; the superintendent’s hat vanishes before it had ever been seen; and Chandler’s famous similes, though twice signaled, are divested of their vehicles, appearing as vacant figures, the pure “as if” structure of literary fiction.

The formal precariousness of the present is not taken up, here or in Webber’s office above the harbor, as an existential theme, *per se*; nor is it quite accurate to suggest that it dramatizes the literary-historical antipathy between narrative and, say, *affect*, which marks (for Jameson, among others) a constitutive tension in the realist novel.²⁸ Rather, it reveals in a more fundamental way the strange counter-humanistic framework necessary to a narrator that is perceptive without being retrospective—to a subject that, in a strict sense, figures as it goes along. This “hollow” narratorial framework is more or less masked by our familiarity with fictive tense structures and other generic conventions, but when it transpires—if it transpires—it effects a phenomenal disruption, a brief warping of the given forms of temporality and spatiality. Such microstructural faults in the existential quality of the narrator are slight enough to go unnoticed in any particular scene or work, but aggregated across the Philip Marlowe novels they constitute what I have suggested to be an ulterior form of narration, a figural development that shapes the “I” from without—an extranarrative voice that resounds locally, so to speak, only in its most abstract or depurated form, present enough to say “I wasn’t even there” but not much more.

We can thus begin to gain an impression of how suspense operates without apparent *prospects* in Chandler in the tenuous configuration of a perpetual present, a fictive *now* held

²⁸ See, for instance, Jameson’s “The Swollen Third Person, or, Realism after Realism” in *The Antinomies of Realism*. (163-92)

flittingly in relief against some extrinsic form of temporality. If this obscure, extranarratorial figure begins to make itself detectible in Chandler's only novel published during World War II, it seems—in remarkable historical synchrony—to leak out, as it were, into the external terrain of his first postwar novel, *The Little Sister* (1949): "Outside on Sunset Boulevard, traffic went by distantly, monotonously. The minutes dropped silently down a well" (294); "I looked out of the window. The crowd was seething on the boulevard, the kitchen of the coffee shop next door was pouring the smell of Blue Plate Specials out of its ventilator shaft. Time passed and I sat there hunched over the desk" (335); "Time seemed to have lost its grip on me. And almost everything else." (373) It is difficult to convey the subtle shift in how time operates in this novel with a few brief quotes, but these should suffice to suggest that the temporal character of Marlowe's world, its movements, its seething and pouring and passing and dripping, has *appeared*, has gone "outside"—but has, in turn, moved "next door," leaving not just "me" but "almost everything else" in place.

This dissociative tendency has been latent in how Marlowe is fashioned as a narrator, but in Chandler's postwar novels, the subtle counterpoint of his particular narrative mode indicates a more universal condition, the suspended state of "almost everything." It is *almost* tempting to call this a metaphysical or existential turn, since it suggests a general structure of experience and has to do with Being and Time in the abstract; but this would minimize the fact that the reconfiguration of narrative temporality does, as in Bowen and to some extent Greene and Reed, indicate an epochal or periodic shift in the forms of the midcentury thriller (and the novel more generally), a shift to a form of posthuman suspense in which anticipation is recursive and has been evacuated of a sense of sympathetic engagement—but a form which remains deeply, if at times even grotesquely and parasitically, attached to the most basic temporal schemes of

narrative realism. And, indeed, between *The Lady in the Lake* (1943) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953), the figure of the veteran—perhaps the most potent imaginable figure of retrospective involvement and its distortive, agonized relation to the present—will work its way to the foreground of Chandler’s aesthetic preoccupations as he prepares to say goodbye to his narrator, toeing the line of vapid, nostalgic sentimentalism even as he finally empties Marlowe of all manner of sentimental attachment never supposed to have been there to begin with.

VI. THE AUTHOR SHOWS HIS HANDS: *PLAYBACK*’S REVERSALS

The governing temporal conflict of the Marlowe novels, and its amplification in Chandler’s later work, can be seen quite vividly in the recurring character of Bernie Ohls, the “old cop” type. When Ohls visits Marlowe in his office in *The Long Goodbye*, 15 years after he was introduced in *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe is apparently still about 38 years old but Ohls has become older in his oldness:

He [Ohls] put his hard blunt hands on the desk and looked at the big brown freckles on the backs of them. “I’m getting old. Keratosis, they call those brown spots. You don’t get them until you’re past fifty. I’m an old cop and an old cop is an old bastard.” (648)

Marlowe ignores the comment as though it could have no possible relevance to him; and the strangeness of the moment is emphasized, as in Webber’s office in *The Lady in the Lake*, by the subtle breaching of perspective—as though the hands are observed from Ohls’s point of view. The reflexive peculiarity of the scene is amplified by the impression that these hands constitute a cameo appearance of the author’s hands. Later in life, Chandler wore gloves in public to cover what his biographers describe as a painful and unsightly skin condition; and knowing this makes

it hard not to imagine the scene playing out from Chandler's point of view, as he sits in private at his desk looking down at the "hard blunt" form of his own disagreeable hands nakedly typing up an indifferent Marlowe.

The moment is echoed in a much more pronounced way in a scene from another novel more readily recognized for its cameo. In the last Marlowe novel, *Playback*, Chandler (who probably picked up the trick from Hitchcock) shows up to meet his hero in the form of a hotel lobby-sitter type named Henry Clarendon IV.²⁹ As Marlowe is being grilled by the hotel's "house dick" (another recurring type, here named Javonen), he points out Clarendon observing them from across the room. For this more public appearance, the gloves are on; and, like the author, the old man carries a cane:

"Watch yourself," I [Marlowe] cut in. "The elderly gent with the walking stick is interested in your reactions."

He looked halfway across the lobby to where a thin, old, bloodless man sat in a very low round-backed padded chair with his chin on gloved hands and the gloved hands on the crook of a stick. He stared unblinkingly in our direction.
(825)

And a few lines later, the creator summons his creation:

Then I noticed that the old party in the low chair had lifted a gloved hand off the crook of his stick and was curving a finger at me. I pointed a finger at my chest and looked the question. He nodded, so over I went.

He was old, all right, but a long way from feeble and a long way from dim. His white hair was neatly parted, his nose was long and sharp and veined, his

²⁹ I may be the first to notice the cameo appearance of the author's hands in *The Long Goodbye*, but it is more widely understood among readers of Chandler that the Clarendon scene is the official cameo.

faded-out blue eyes were still keen, but the lids drooped wearily over them. One ear held the plastic button of a hearing aid, grayish pink like his ear. The suede gloves on his hands had the cuffs turned back. He wore gray spats over polished black shoes.

“Pull up a chair, young man.” His voice was thin and dry and rustled like bamboo leaves. (825-6)

Beyond the odd, insistent repetition of the image of “gloved hands,” the clue that clinches the case of the old man’s identity, Chandler adds to his proxy an ailment that was not apparently his own. In a poignant irony, Clarendon’s deafness means that he will not hear Marlowe, whose “voice” had become so deeply associated with the particular timber and cadence of the voice-overs of *film noir*—a genre that had reached its height in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but by 1957 (when *Playback* was published) had already been for some time displaying the symptomatic convulsions of reflexive parody that mark the dying days of every genre.

Clarendon calls attention to his deafness by explaining to Marlowe that he reads lips—a trick he picked up as a young man determined that, as an old man, he shouldn’t have to carry an ear trumpet. This youthful determination has now been rendered obsolete by the invention of the hearing aid, which adds to the more general distancing effect of the temporal situation of the scene—a scene into which Clarendon’s own voice enters through a synesthetic process only possible in poetry: “his voice was thin and dry and rustled like bamboo leaves.” Chandler has gone to considerable effort here, it seems, to offset Marlowe’s world as something to be read and not to be heard—an effort encapsulated in the choice of the name *Clarendon*, a word that doesn’t sound at all like *Chandler* but that does look very much like it on the page. These gestures are, however, undercut to some extent by the camouflaged presence of the hearing aid, a prosthetic

device that is as functional in this scene as it is unnecessary—a device that, blending in with the “grayish pink” of the old man’s flesh, hints at an aesthetic rivalry that Chandler, caught up in a larger process of creative evolution, seems bound to lose.

But the more basic temporal problem of the scene is that its quasi-allegorical opposition of youth and old age in the figures of “young man” and “old man” is unsettled by the fact that Marlowe doesn’t age in a world where everyone else does. This is a problem that Chandler seems to have deliberated over while writing the scene. Consulting an early manuscript draft of the novel, one can see that he fussed over the details of the encounter, adding in more corrections by hand than he did for most of the other scenes in the novel. A notable consistency in these hand written changes is that Chandler removed several instances of Clarendon referring to Marlowe as “young man.” In the final version, he does address him as “young man” a few times, but the effect of the revisions is that, by the end of the exchange, the oldness of the old man type is given much greater emphasis than the youngness of the young man type, a shift that seems very much to have been deliberate.³⁰

³⁰ “Playback: Half-sheet original,” *Raymond Chandler Papers, 1930-1959*, UCLA Special Collections, Collection 638, Box 5, Folder 17.

And the same shift of emphasis is evident where Marlowe refers to his own age. Where the first typewritten version reads “I stayed deadpan polite, just a nice young guy (young by his standards anyway) being polite to an old gentleman who liked to talk,” Chandler changes this to “I stayed deadpan polite, just a nice youngish guy (by his standards) being polite to an old gentleman who liked to talk” (figure 3.8). In this context, the corrective *ish* doesn’t seem to mean that Marlowe considers himself *sort of* young (*young* has been removed too); rather, he considers himself able to act *sort of* like the sort of person that, by the “standards” of another, would be considered young—whereas the old man remains squarely an old man type. While the change seems subtle, it indicates how—practically speaking—the temporal peculiarities of the Marlowe novels produce a figure that is, so to speak, typicalish in a way that structures and accents the more rigid typicality of those around him.

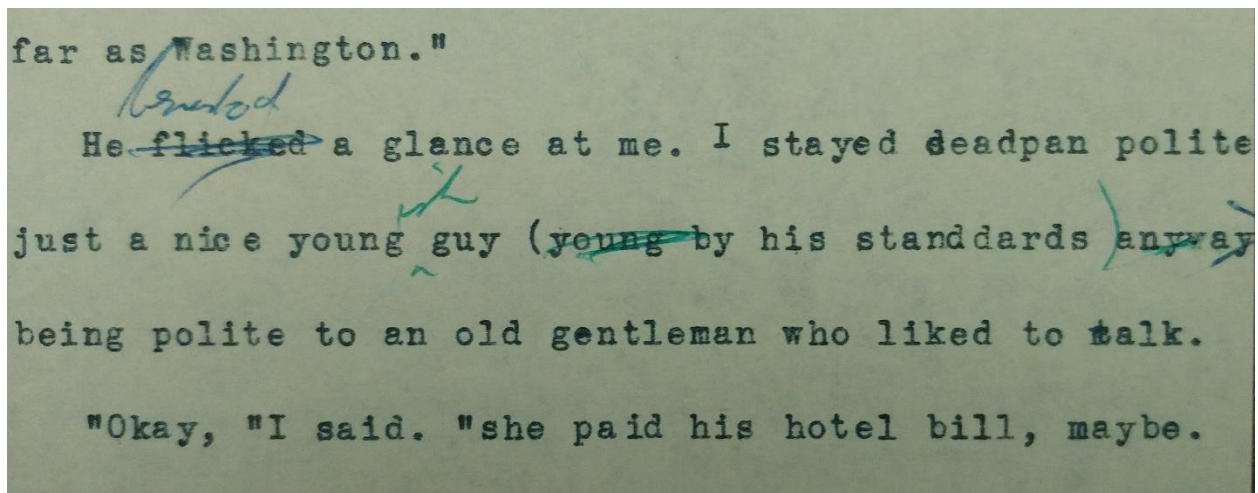


Figure 3.8: From young to youngish.

The exchange between the old man and the youngish man is also remarkable in the context of all of the other the Marlowe novels for being overtly religious, centering on what Clarendon calls the “grave difficulties of the afterlife.” While he sarcastically insists to Marlowe that it is a great comfort to believe in “an omniscient and omnipotent God who intended everything exactly the way it was,” he tries to convince Marlowe (who doesn’t need convincing)

that if such a god existed, he would not have bothered to create the universe—or if he had, he would have made it much simpler (829). Clarendon’s theological musings are somewhat rambling—and out of respect for Marlowe’s impatience to get on with the story, Clarendon refrains from subjecting him to the whole of what he calls “the overlong book of my words”—but the dominant theme is the recurrence in nature of complex patterns and detailed similitudes:

Very small things amuse a man of my age. A hummingbird, the extraordinary way a strellitzia bloom opens. Why at a certain point in its growth does the bud turn at right angles? Why does the bud split so gradually and why do the flowers emerge always in a certain exact order, so that the sharp unopened end of the bud looks like a bird’s beak and the blue and orange petals make a bird of paradise?
(829)

Clarendon believes that an omnipotent god could not be responsible for such patterning effects, the inexorable movements of “small things” toward states of perfect similarity—of unlikely likenesses—since these can also result in recurrent situations of misery, cruelty and violence. (Consider, for instance, how the Marlowe novels don’t really concern themselves as much with solving crimes as they do with reenacting crimes or recreating in detail scenes of violence that precede the events depicted within the story.) His position is not ultimately an atheistic one; rather it seeks to articulate a form of divine imperfection, a god that is unnaturally simple and inexact and that, unlike everything else, fails always to fulfill its function—and even sometimes, as Clarendon puts it, “has very, very long days” (830).

There’s some irony to this position since Clarendon himself is true to type in a number of ways—an old man type, a hotel-sitter type, and an author type (authored in the image of his author)—and since the movements of his body and mind seem mechanistic and extrinsically

determined: “He moved one gloved hand over the other. He tilted his stick and followed it with his body. He stared at the pattern in the carpet. Finally he clicked his teeth. He had solved the problem. He straightened up again” (828). Yet nevertheless, he has dedicated himself to a life-program of “reversing the pattern,” even while conceding that doing so is impossible (829). This is an aesthetic commitment more so than a religious one: “there is no success where there is no possibility of failure,” he says, “no art without the resistance of the medium”—and the medium, in his case, is a woman (830). His plan for reversing the pattern is to marry a rich divorcee type named Margo West, who resides at the hotel. She, however, only marries gigolo types; and, having done so and divorced seven times already, she shows no indication that she will ever do anything else. So upon parting company with Chandler’s imaginary proxy, there is a rather deep ambivalence implied in Marlowe’s impression that the man is “smooth operator” (825): as both a component of the machine and the one who operates it in all its complexity, Clarendon has succeeded precisely where he means to fail.

The ambivalence of the situation resounds in the final scene of *Playback*, notorious for a sudden encroachment of apparent sentimentality that loyal readers of Chandler tend to interpret as a grotesque betrayal of all that has come before it. Defending the novel doesn’t seem like it would be a good use of space here, but I do think it’s useful to consider this work (even more so, maybe, than the *Long Goodbye*) as the culminating work of the Marlowe series insofar as it takes the general formal strategy of the other novels to its reflexive extreme—resisting the medium, as it were, but at the same time internalizing the basic temporal structure that has so far been evident only where it flittingly fails, where the perpetual present slips into the “very, very long days” that must somehow encompass it.

The meaning of the novel's title remains somewhat vague, but it refers to the plight of Betty Mayfield, a *femme fatale* type who, *because* she is a *femme fatale* type, has been wrongfully convicted of killing her husband, a veteran who had sustained a precarious neck injury during the war. The husband, in fact, was an abusive drunk, and one night he had removed his neck brace as a way of terrorizing her. While doing so, he managed to break his own neck; but, while Betty attempts to reattach the brace and save him, his wealthy, corrupt and politically powerful father walks into the room and immediately accuses her of murder. He raises the town's suspicions against her, and she is convicted by a mindless jury, but a magnanimous judge throws out the verdict. Despite the father's pledge to hunt her to the ends of the earth, she changes her name, skips town and re-settles in a fictionalized La Jolla, California (where Chandler himself lived at the time of writing the novel)—only to find the whole situation “playing back” again in the new place: once again, she finds herself in a room with a dead man, surrounded by a similar cast of characters, and wrongfully suspected of murder.

Her existential bind is metadramatic in way that calls Hamlet to mind—she knows exactly what sort of play she's trapped in and playing back, but can't figure a way out. Chandler summarizes the basic idea in a note accompanying an early manuscript version of the screenplay on which the novel was based:

The crucial week in the life of a girl who decides to spend it in a tower suite in a hotel, under an assumed name, her identity thoroughly concealed with great care, to accept what comes, and at the end of the week to jump to her death.

During this week the frustrations and tragedies of her life are repeated in capsule form, so that it almost appears that she brought her destiny with her, and that wherever she went the same sort of thing would happen to her.

You don't know whether Betty killed her husband or not. You don't know whether she shot Brandon or not.³¹

The film (which was never produced) was not intended to feature Marlowe, and one of the many disorienting effects of the story being re-focalized through Marlowe's first person narration, is that, though Mayfield's plan to kill herself is suppressed, the intense patterning effect of her existential bind inflects the entire milieu of the novel as Marlowe travels down the coast of California in pursuit of the missing woman. Thus, the whole temporal and social-typological scheme of Chandler's literary vision of Los Angeles seems to follow his hero and recur "in capsule form," its tragedies and frustrations suddenly confined almost exclusively to a single hotel in La Jolla, playing out as destiny rather than remaining in the state of perpetual presence usually assumed for them.

The resounding effect of this allegorical compression is a kind of generic claustrophobia, a sense that the organizing structure of the novel has encroached on the diegesis and has begun to collapse in on itself. One gets the sense, as in a Thomas Pynchon novel, that in the course of figuring out whether Betty killed her husband or whether she shot someone, Marlowe might *almost* (but never quite) be in a position to figure out that he's actually just a character in a novel—and even that he's met its author!—and thus he might almost be in a position retroactively to better understand why it is that he's felt so inhuman for all the years he's spent as a 38-year-old. The result is a peculiar formal reflexivity: a series of reversals that give the impression that the novel, not unlike Clarendon, spasmodically reacts against the aesthetic schemes around which all of the previous novels have been organized. The first and most obvious symptom of this is that Marlowe inexplicably begins having sex with the various types

³¹ "Story idea," *Raymond Chandler Papers, 1930-1959*, UCLA Special Collections, Collection 638, Box 9, Folder 6.

of women whom he's always refused—and that he dreams of reuniting with Linda Loring (whom he'd spent the night with near the end of *The Long Goodbye*, his first fully realized erotic encounter in any of the novels). In another major reversal, he solves the mystery but lets the killer go because, though the man still thinks about killing and seems like the killer type, he confides to Marlowe that “I just don't seem to be that kind of guy anymore” (867).

But the most dramatic reversal (one that is a frequent target of derision among readers of Chandler) is that the novel ends with a romantic cliffhanger—the impending return of Linda Loring—which is totally extraneous to its plot. Marlowe sits in his apartment dreaming of what it will be like when she arrives:

I looked around the empty room—which was no longer empty. There was a voice in it, and a tall slim lovely woman. There was a dark hair on the pillow in the bedroom. There was that soft gentle perfume of a woman who presses herself tight against you, whose lips are soft and yielding, whose eyes are half blind.
(817)

His fantasy is interrupted by his ringing telephone, the lawyer Clyde Ulmney calling on behalf of a client, but Marlowe hangs up. When the phone rings again it goes unanswered and the novel ends:

There were sounds of strangled fury as I hung up on him. Almost immediately the telephone started to ring again.

I hardly heard it. The air was full of music. (871)

If the prospect of Mayfield's suicide was suppressed in the novel, it returns here in the obscure but unmistakable allusion to Macbeth's speech following the suicide of Lady Macbeth—who is, at least by some interpretations (Orson Welles's prominent among them in Chandler's time) one

of the great *femme fatale* types in the history of English literature. Though this figure has been diminished, the scene is hardly one of perfect domestic harmony, introducing a new element of suspense, which, rather than sustaining the “forever and forever and forever” of Marlowe’s eternal present, indicates for the first time a series of tomorrows.

That the killer, for once, has not been punished, would seem to cast the first shadow over the affair. In his notes on the mystery novel, Chandler puts forward the view that, “despite popular opinion,” the ends of murder mysteries should have “nothing to do with morality.” He continues: the criminal’s punishment “is part of the logic of the form. Without this the story is like an unresolved cord in music. It leaves a sense of irritation” (*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, 66)—which is to suggest that the music filling the air at the end of *Playback* is not likely to be marriage bells. Rather, it is a noise that accompanies the formal dissolution of the *femme fatale* into the scenery of domesticity, conveying a lingering sense of disharmony and irresolution—and even, perhaps, of mounting conflict. The dialectical confrontation of sight and sound that has been a running motif in the novel is here coordinated with what is arguably the single most intractable social conflict of all of the Marlowe novels: the epic and unending collision between the various generic formulations of masculinity and femininity, between archetypes of Man and Woman. Here Man seems temporarily vanquished—strangled, furious—the world of professional duty shut out by a confounding sensualism. But if the most enduring social-typological scheme of the Marlowe novels seems, in its endless playback, to have undergone a process of atomization—dissipating in air—it has not thereby “conjure[d] into being” an image of the future; rather, it has outlined a new structure of suspense, a perfect crisis in the “logic of the form.”

VII. PERFECT TIME: "THE PENCIL"

This is a crisis that Chandler will not himself resolve before his death in 1959, about two years after *Playback* was published. He did begin a draft of another Marlowe novel under the working title "The Poodle Springs Story" (named after his fictionalized Palm Springs). In the brief fragment of this that was published posthumously, Marlowe has married Linda Loring after all (despite Chandler's earlier interdiction against married detectives); but there seems to be every indication that the relationship will encroach too much on the detective's autonomy to be more than an episode. He did, however, complete one more Marlowe story, mentioned in the introduction here, called "The Pencil."³² In this story, though he complains about beatniks being too loud, time still doesn't seem to have affected Marlowe; and there's no evidence that he has ever been married. The noisy eroticism that filled the air in *Playback* and continued to affect the climate in "The Poodle Springs Story" has now been sublimated into a platonic partnership with the reprise nearly 20 years later of an un-aged Anne Riordan, who had been introduced in *Farewell, My Lovely* ("How come I'm still a virgin at 28?," she asks Marlowe ["The Pencil," 1241]).

The title of the story refers to what Chandler calls, in a brief introductory note, "the technique of the Syndicate's murders" (1233). "The Outfit, the Syndicate, the big mob, or whatever name you want to use for it" is an administrative system, a set of autopoietic operations rather than characters or even character types, and its murders are determined, as Marlowe explains it, by "reason" rather than by "kicks" (1238-9). This is all official business, and death has become a matter of bookkeeping: "You have a list. You draw a line through a name with a pencil. The guy is as good as dead." The process works by conjuring into being two killers who

³² Raymond Chandler, "The Poodle Springs Story," *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, edited by Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 253-64.

will “look like anybody who’s in a quiet well-run business or profession,” carrying handguns in briefcases.³³ The killer couple will be strangers to the victim and strangers to each other, but they will appear on the same airplane, take the same taxi, live together, and together grow intimately familiar with the guy who has been penciled as they observe his movements. They are professionals, and when the time comes, they will do exactly what is always done exactly because it is always done that way: they will calmly approach the target to a distance of 3 feet, state the person’s name out loud, fill him with bullets, drop their guns, and then vanish in a getaway car driven by a “blameless citizen” with no criminal record who will be wearing a monogrammed shirt (1239-40).

The set-up provides a concise example of what, in his recent study of suspense, Mark Seltzer describes as the “serial reenactments, compulsive mobilities, and lethal but reincarnative drives” that comprise the operations of an “official world” (10). This is an autogenic mode of suspense that functions as “a structure held in place and supported by its own tensions, and nothing else” (10-1). One result of a situation in which, as Marlowe observes, “all rackets tie together,” is that rackets no longer do much else but sustain the general tying together of rackets, since there’s nothing in particular to tie them together. In the case of “The Pencil,” Marlowe identifies the man to be killed, Ikky Rosenstein, as a former “troubleshooter” for the organization—which is to say that his function in the organization is to observe and to correct dysfunctions in the organization for the sake only of supporting the organization. And so, though the troubleshooter assures Marlowe that he has never killed anyone, he is a literal shooter in the sense that his troubleshooting ensures that, in cases where troubleshooting fails, the process of

³³ This a technical refinement of the elaborate and bulky modes of covert weapons conveyance and storage of, say, Stanly Kubrick’s *The Killing*, a film that had been produced three years before based on a Jim Thomson novel and is also about super-organized crime

shooting will be put in motion as always—and this comprises the story’s structure of suspense. The key issue here is that, since this is a recursive operation that depends on processes of observation that are always organized at a higher level, Ikky’s failure is rendered inevitable by the second-order observation of the system (or whatever name you want to use for it), a situation of which—being a great observer—Marlowe is well aware: “He [Ikky] was a pretty good observer. Trouble was the Outfit would know what he had seen” (1237). In this sense, the necessary correlative to the “fusion of extreme formality and extreme violence,” as Seltzer phrases it, is the perpetuation of a certain form of blindness, which can be understood as a systematic amplification of the blind-spot previewed in Montgomery’s *The Lady in the Lake* (17).

The troubleshooter’s trouble, in other words, is that he has been out-observed, which, when translated back into the longstanding generic terms of the novel of detection, means he has been outsmarted (“They outfigured me. What I did been done before, but I didn’t know it” [1235]). In this case, however, the process of ratiocination has been externalized as a process of tiered observation—it is no longer lingeringly thematized as a mental or psychological or even human act and thus confounds identification in any familiar sense. In a way, Marlowe, as a literary detective, has always been a figure that stands for the obsolescence of the sort of figure that he is (consider how often he’s still defined as Sherlock Holmes’s antitype); and a number of strong cases could be made that even *he*, at various moments throughout his career, becomes obsolete; but here in what is actually his final public appearance, his formal precariousness seems most absolute. How could Marlowe possibly persist in this world?

As I suggested earlier, the organization comes in Chandler’s later fiction to stand in its extremity for the structuring effects of time, and accordingly Marlowe’s impending extinction is

figured in terms of his profound temporal incompatibility with it. “We could use you,” says an operative to Marlowe, “But it’s a long time for you and no time at all to us”—a sentiment that echoes Marlowe’s own impression of the professional killers at work: “In no time at all they were completely gone” (1263, 1255). The incompatibility arises from the fact that the organization’s mode of temporalization—its manner of going on and on—is observation, whereas Marlowe’s mode of temporalization is narration. This differential, as I have tried to show in the previous sections here, has been operating in the background throughout the Marlowe novels as an uneasy tension between the “very, very long days” of Marlowe’s perpetual present and the gaping void suggested by the lack of a narrative situation—and thus a point of view—from which the present transpires. But now the formal mechanism—the “gears” of its “affect machinery” (to recall Avanessian and Hennig’s term from chapter one)—have been exposed: the “core of inhumanity” persists only so long as Marlowe speaks, as Chandler writes, of having seen it see.

In this sense (if not in all senses) the abstract menace of the organization is mitigated by the impression that it might just be an accidental effect of the creative process, a more or less schematic index of the difference, not just between media, but between the senses—and of the sorts of tensions this produces for any aesthetic practice. The suppression in Chandler of a conventional narrator—and, as it were, a “grand” narrative—need not be taken as a protopostmodernist skepticism about the mimetic claims of an outmoded realism; rather, it indicates one stage (early or late, depending on your point of view) in a more general process through which aesthetic sensibilities are reorganized as forms of suspense grow increasingly recursive, tuning less and less on modes of anticipation than on (as was already evident in

Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*) the empty formalization of anticipation, the anticipation of anticipation, or suspense suspended.

While Chandler's organization may have been conceived in reference to historically specific events (i.e. the consolidation of black market economies following the repeal of Prohibition), in the end it comes to represent pure formality as distinct from perception. It is "inhuman" because it is "perfect all the time"; and Marlowe's relation to it is not *critical* per se, since he still doesn't have a point of view. He *is*, however, an excellent observer, and so there's not much else for him to do but study and describe the organization's imperfections. Having accepted the Syndicate's troubled troubleshooter for his last client, he thus positions himself as a troubleshooter on behalf of trouble; instead of solving anything, he watches the reenactment of a perfect murder and comments on its faults: "gradually I saw the little touches that flaw the picture" (1266).

But to what end? Midway through the story, he receives in the mail "a longish narrowish box," marked "Special Delivery." The box contains no letter, "nothing at all but a new freshly-sharpened pencil" (1253). If the scene feels faintly familiar, it is because it echoes a similar one from a decade before in which the context is entirely obscure: "I picked up a pencil and felt the point. It was a good sharp point, if anybody wanted to write anything. I didn't." This is from *The Little Sister* and has nothing to do with any narrative or symbolic developments in that novel; it seems to be there only as an oblique reminder that Marlowe is not a writer (397). The reprise of this moment in the context of "The Pencil," however, carries a different weight. One could expect that this would be the moment, in his final episode, that Marlowe—having now officially studied the perfection of murder—would sit down to write the story that we've been reading all these years. Instead, in a demonstration for Bernie Ohls (who is still an old cop and too old to

understand these things), he uses the pencil to enact the organizing principle of the story's suspense: "I opened the middle desk drawer and took out the nice sharp pencil. I wrote my name on a piece of paper and ran the pencil through it" (1258). Nothing happens, of course: the act of inscription is perfectly autonomous; but, even if there's no communication to the outside, this guy like the others is as good as dead.

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